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Vol. 98, No. 3 Jane Littell, Editor July, 1943

Serial

KISS AND RUN (Part One) ..... **Margaret Wallace** 8
What does a man do when he inherits all his brother's girls?

Short Stories

LOVE FOR A MARINE ..... **A. P. Cooke** 28
Lola served her country with glamour and music.

KISSES DON'T LIE ..... **Carmelita Bullock** 40
But they have to be mighty potent to make a girl turn down riches for denim.

THE SIXTY-FOUR DOLLAR QUESTION ..... **Laura Loudon** 50
It was a proposal of marriage. But Lee had to ask Kelley.

TOO MANY MEN ..... **Helen Hibbard Dau** 62
Men like to give a glamour girl a rush, but do they want to marry her?

A PICTURE TO TAKE WITH HIM ..... **Jane Levington Comfort** 74
A soldier needs the memory of a pretty girl to take with him overseas.

ISLAND GIRL ..... **Anne Fowler Hill** 80
Should a girl in love disregard the *tabu* of the native Hawaiians?

DREAM TOMORROW ..... **Agnes Best Nafziger** 90
Tomorrow Bill would be overseas, so Robbie made her dreams come true today.

BEST SMILE FORWARD ..... **Donna Geyer** 100
Jean offered her heart, but all Randy wanted was friendship.

Features

FURLOUGH SURPRISE ..... **Eric Landis** 6

PLAINT ..... **R. H. Grenville** 49

DOROTHEA DALE'S FRIENDLY CIRCLE 110

Next Issue Out July 9th

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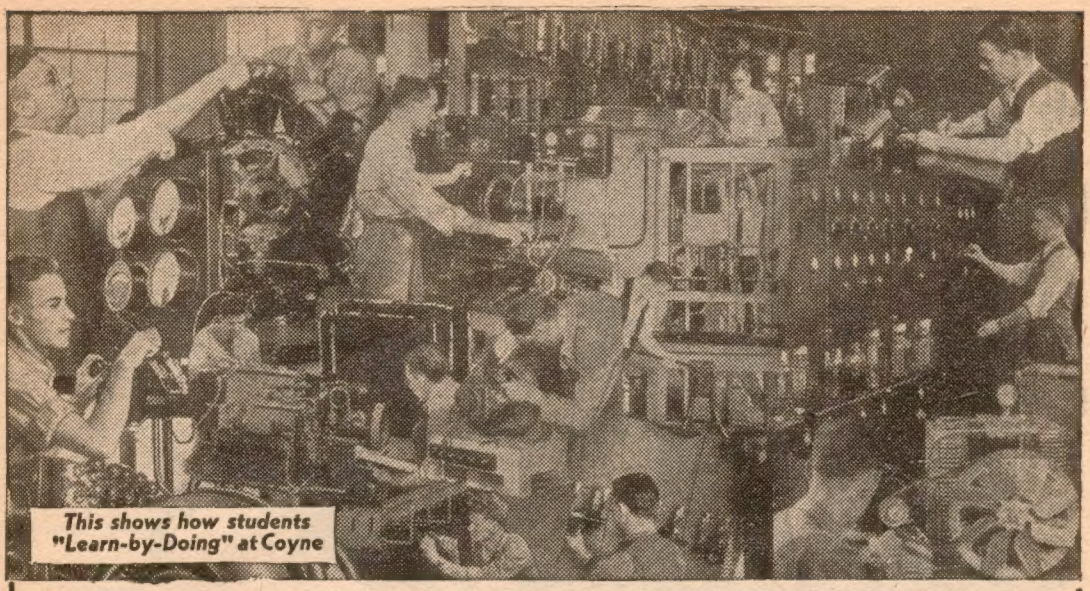

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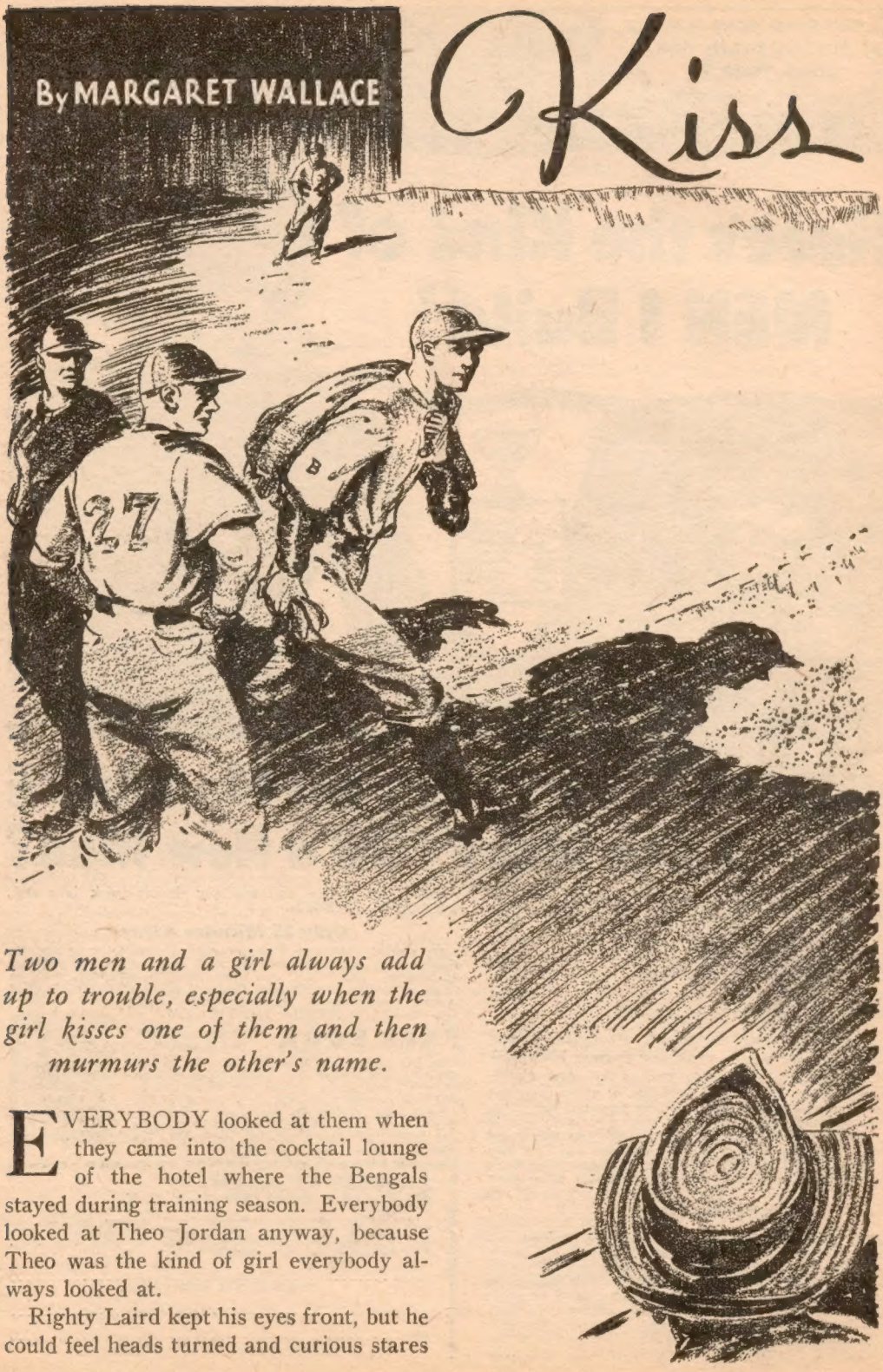
Kiss



Two men and a girl always add up to trouble, especially when the girl kisses one of them and then murmurs the other's name.

EVERYBODY looked at them when they came into the cocktail lounge of the hotel where the Bengals stayed during training season. Everybody looked at Theo Jordan anyway, because Theo was the kind of girl everybody always looked at.

Righty Laird kept his eyes front, but he could feel heads turned and curious stares

and Run

Righty flipped his hand in a gesture of greeting, but Theo looked straight through him as if he weren't there at all.

boring through his broad tweed back as he followed her to one of the red leather banquettes along the wall. He pulled the table out a little so that she could slide in first. His ears were starting to burn and he could feel the color washing up under his high cheekbones and into the roots of his sun-bleached hair.

It came to him that it had been a mistake to bring her here. Shorty Rudeen, the coach, was sitting at the bar talking to a couple of newspaper men. Phil Maury, one of the starting pitchers, was feeding quarters into a slot machine in the corner, pulling the lever down and listening with stolid fascination to the grinding noise that resulted.

Just to make everything perfect, Righty caught a glimpse of the baldish head and unblinking gray eyes of Shumlin, the Bengal manager. Something shriveled up inside him.

Apple-polisher, he thought, calling himself the kindest of the things they would tag him with in the locker room tomorrow. This was a fine way to make friends and influence Shumlin. A rookie pitcher taking out the daughter of the man who had just bought the ball club! Bringing her to the hotel, too, so the common folks could have a treat.

Suppose it wasn't like that at all, Righty thought grimly. That was how it looked, wasn't it? Let the other pitchers who hoped to be around when the season opened sweat their hearts out working on their deliveries. Not Righty Laird! He knew a trick worth two of that. He preferred to work on the only daughter of the majority stockholder.

He could feel them thinking it. He would have thought the same thing himself if somebody else—Bubber Jones, say—had been in his shoes. The only trouble was he had not stopped to think.

It had been a nice voice on his telephone.

"This is Theo Jordan. Roger used to talk about you constantly, and when I heard you were joining the ball club—"

It always stopped Righty for a minute to hear his brother called Roger. They had been Lefty and Righty for so long, ever since Sophomore year in college, that they even used the nicknames themselves. It was kind of hard to remember that legally, and to their womenfolk if any, they were Roger and Duncan Laird.

The voice flowed on through the telephone. It was husky and somehow musical at the same time. He guessed this was one of Lefty's women all right. Righty took his feet down off the footboard of the bed and sat up, still hunching the receiver to his ear. Miraculously he had quit being bored.

"What about right now?" he said. "I'm not doing anything. Swell. Downstairs in the lobby in half an hour. You'll know me. I'll be wearing shabby but well-cut tweeds. Also I look just like Roj, only with the glamour left out."

Righty looked at the telephone respectfully, then replaced it in its cradle and gave it a grateful pat. Any gal with a voice like that! Maybe what he meant was any gal, period. The tiredness had flowed suddenly out of his back and shoulders.

He slipped the knot of his necktie, unbuttoned the two top buttons of his shirt and began pulling it off over his head. He was whistling *The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You* dolefully off key, which meant rapidly rising spirits.

Wonder how I'm doing for five o'clock shadow, he thought, and stalked over to the mirror, peering critically at his hard, tanned jaw, looking for traces of a beard too blond to show in any but the most revealing light. Not till then, not till he was plugging in the electric razor, did it dawn on him who she really was.

Two years on the ranch must have thickened him up in the head, as well as the shoulders. Jeepers, she was *the* Theo Jordan. Mr. Frederick Langley Jordan's

little girl Theodora, no less. Heiress apparent to half the steel mills and coal mines in Pennsylvania and also to the pennant-bound Bengals, including the relatively humble property known as Duncan Laird.

There was nothing humble about the grin Righty's mirror gave back to him, though. Leave it to Lefty, he thought. Good old Lefty. Whiskey or women or no matter what, nothing but the best was good enough. Thanks, pal, said Duncan Laird silently to Roger.

Righty still thought he was going to have fun.

WITH the back of his neck a dull brick color, Righty folded his astonishing length into the banquette beside Theo Jordan. Now that they had all looked him over, now that it had occurred to him to do a little somber reflecting, he could think of all kinds of reasons why he ought to be somewhere else. Including the report, possibly without foundation, that Ray Shumlin hated Frederick L. Jordan's guts.

Maybe that was not strictly the case. Though there had been a lot of dickering last winter when it came time to renew Shumlin's contract as manager. Mr. Jordan—sometimes called "Deacon" Jordan by the sports columnists—was a noted amateur sportsman and dyed-in-the-wool baseball fan. But he held to the quaint belief that the Bengals would do better as a team if they gave more time to routine gymnastics and less to gin rummy. It was rumored that Shumlin had practically had to sign the pledge and limit himself to two-bit bets in order to keep his job.

Righty's shirt was sticking clammily to his ribs. Oh, Lord, he thought, am I asking for it? Will he sweat this out of me?

It was all his own fault. What could you expect a girl to know about the politics that went on in a ball club? So, of course, Righty was bitterly and righteously annoyed with Theo Jordan for getting him into it.

He looked at her coldly. She was beautiful. Just a rich glamour-puss, he thought. Just a platinum-plated little exhibitionist who went around taking up the time of people who had work to do. No gal who knew what money was for would take a camel's hair coat like that one—as white and soft as swansdown, with the kind of swagger simplicity purveyed by only the snootiest tailors—and wear it draped off one shoulder, as much as to say, "This old rag."

And that twist of white silk around her head, that left a froth of darkish blonde curls bursting out at the top. And flat-heeled oxfords, white buckskin with shawl tongues—from a London bootmaker, he did not doubt. And no make-up except a slash of scarlet lipstick. All she needs, he said sourly to himself, is a shooting-stick.

Righty did not know much about women's clothes, but he thought he could see the arrogance under that casual pose. With looks like that she doesn't need to bother. Uh-huh! So she just manages to make all the other gals look as if they were trying too hard and not quite making the grade.

"Well?" he asked, not trying to sound polite. The waiter was standing at his elbow.

Theo waved away the drink list. "I'd like an old-fashioned, please."

Righty ordered beer for himself.

Apparently she had not noticed his tone. Any more than she noticed the stir their entrance caused, the ripple of curiosity that ran through the room like wind rustling through leaves. Probably she was good at not noticing things.

He knew how it would be. Heads turned wherever she went. People from out of town exchanged excited whispers. *Don't look now, but isn't that Katharine*

Hepburn? People who had been around, or thought they had, whispered, too. *That's Theodora Jordan. We saw her at the horse show that time, remember?*

Or maybe it would be the boat races at New London, or wherever it was that fashionable sportswomen liked to show themselves these days. Personally, Righty wouldn't know. He had been out of town too long himself.

"You do look like Roger," she said. "Only more serious."

She looked up then and her eyes hit him like a blow. Deep-set under light lashes, they were unexpectedly frank and blue. It occurred to Righty that she must be younger than he had thought. Not more than twenty, which was four years younger than he was himself.

"That's what they tell me," he said in a tone of heavy indifference. He steeled himself to endure an inevitable half hour of feminine chatter.

Then he could excuse himself. Then he could get away and start living down his new and undeserved reputation as an apple-polisher.

So he looked more serious than Lefty, did he? Well, somebody had to be serious. Somebody had to stay home and hold things together when Lefty went galloping off to the wars. There were several thousand head of cattle which would have to be sold off and slaughtered unless one of the Laird boys could bring home some money. And that didn't mean peanuts, either. It didn't mean the pay and allowances of a captain in the Air Corps.

Well, as they say, we can't all be heroes. Righty's shoulders stirred in a faint shrug. He was used to the fact that Lefty was the hero in the Laird family.

Anyway he had thought he was used to it. He thought he did not mind. Nothing had prepared him for the way he felt when the Army doctor snapped off the light in the X-ray viewing box and shook his head.

"Sorry, Laird. No combat branch of the service will take a chance on those ribs of yours."

Nothing had prepared him for the disappointment that hit him like a hard right to the solar plexus, for the bitterness that came up in his throat.

For a minute he had hated Lefty, wanted to hate Lefty. He wanted to shout that it was all Lefty's fault. If Lefty had worn a parachute that day, then they could both have bailed out. He would never have risked a crash landing. He would not have tried to set their little Stinson down on its belly in a cow pasture.

Righty had swallowed his bitterness and said nothing. Not to the curious and sceptical reporters nor anyone else. Afterward he knew it was just one of the breaks that might happen to anybody. So far as that went, Lefty might have been badly hurt himself or even killed. Only he wasn't. He was hardly scratched.

Lefty was reckless—and lucky. He had what the newspapers called color, a dashing, crowd-catching quality worth any amount of plugging. He wouldn't have been Lefty if he had gone back after his parachute that day.

Righty realized that Theo Jordan had gone on talking, which was natural and to be expected. Women always did. What was not so natural, he realized after a few minutes, was that she was talking, not about Lefty but about his much less spectacular self.

"Roger thought you would never go back to baseball again. After that ghastly accident, I mean. I was awfully thrilled when I heard you had signed with the Bengals."

"Thanks," Righty said coldly.

"Are you all right now?"

"I guess so," he said. "If the patches hold."

"Anyway Roger said you really liked it down on the ranch and didn't care about all the applause and having your name in

the headlines and everything. He said he ate it up, but you were too grown-up to fall for it."

Righty said nothing.

He found himself watching her eyes again. You read about blue eyes a lot, but it was not often you saw any that really were a bright clear blue.

He decided it was the way they were set, deep like that, and the contrasting golden tan of her skin that made them so surprising. She was all an even color of tan, hair and skin both, until she glanced up. They stopped you every time.

He decided the hell with it. He reminded himself that she was a rich glamour-puss and Frederick L. Jordan's daughter and the quicker he got away from here the better it would be.

"I saw you once four years ago, when you pitched the Yale-Columbia game at New Haven. I thought you were wonderful. Then Roger talked about you so much I practically felt as if I knew you. He admires you frightfully."

Again silence fell. Righty allowed it to lie there.

"I read Frank Graham's piece about you in the *Sun* yesterday. Have you really been working on a knuckle ball?"

Righty took his nose out of his beer and looked at her sardonically. Lots of gals thought they knew about baseball. Just show him one who really did.

"Newspaper talk," he said curtly. "I just throw it in there and pray."

THEY were both silent for a moment. There was a tinge more color under the smooth tan of her cheeks. Righty felt slightly ashamed of himself for an instant.

Then he thought: Nuts, last year it was yacht racing or something. This year it's baseball. Just because Poppa bought her a ball club to play with. Well, democracy was all the rage these days. No doubt baseball seemed to her like a nice democratic game to be interested in.

She said finally, one light eyebrow quirked innocently, "Oh, is that how you do it? I always wondered. And to think you had an earned-run average of two point one three."

Righty had a pretty fair poker face. He had learned in the course of some tough going not to show much of what he felt. He hoped he did not look surprised at that one.

"I suppose," she added, so smoothly he could not be sure she meant it, "that's about all you'll need this year, with all the good hitters gone to war. Take the Giants."

"Let's not," Righty begged.

He caught the waiter's attention and ordered another beer. It did not occur to him that he was being melted down already. All he knew was that he was beginning to be amused. For fifteen minutes now he had not spared a thought to Ray Shumlin.

"I haven't seen the Giants," he reminded her. "Not since 1940. I don't get around to all the games the way you city folks do."

"Just a barefoot boy," Theo smiled. "With cheek."

Righty's head snapped up. "What—" he began, and started to grin.

"Tell me, how on earth did they ever lure you away from your farm? You and Arky Vaughan and Camilli?"

Ouch, Righty thought. She had him there. Considering that the $5000 her father had paid him for signing was the principal lure. The gal might be spoiled, but she could take it. He was beginning to suspect that she could also dish it out.

"I got strong enough so I could lift everything on the place," he admitted, "except the mortgage. Just for that, you tell me something. How come you know my earned-run average the year I was with San Francisco?"

Afterward he thought it must have been that second beer that was responsible for

all his troubles. Righty was not used to drinking. Not since the seven months in a hospital that followed the crash landing, and the time on the ranch when he had been too busy to drink and there was nobody he wanted to drink with anyway. Except for that second beer he would never have got mellow enough to ask her to dinner.

They went to a place she suggested. It was a quiet little place with a three-piece orchestra. Righty was relieved when he looked at the prices on the menu. He had put the bonus money straight into mortgage payments. All he got until the season opened was expenses. Now that he thought of it, Theo was pretty sweet to propose something like this. Probably she was used to glitter joints.

Also, now that Ray Shumlin could not see him, he thought he would like an old-fashioned, too.

"Had you better?" Theo asked doubtfully. "You're pitching against the Giants tomorrow."

Righty looked at her across the table, not wanting to show how surprised he was, his eyes starting to glow.

"I am," he said slowly. "Are you sure?"

"No. That's just the way I heard it. Dad said he would like to see you start a game, and Mr. Shumlin said your curve was breaking nicely so why not."

Righty tried not to feel too good about it. It was just an exhibition game. That was what he tried to tell himself. But it was the Bengal's first home game at Tillman Park, too. If he could last nine innings, if he could beat the Giants, on his first appearance before a crowd of home-town fans—Jeepers!

Shumlin had only four starting pitchers. Phil Maury, the lanky right-hander from Georgia, who had turned in his best season last year with 23 wins and 7 losses. The pudgy veteran, Tim Corcoran, who was slowing up now but could still pitch air-tight ball when the chips were down. The bean-pole left-hander, Chet Fillmore. And Ace Decker, who had a pretty fair fast ball and four children that got him deferred in the draft.

He needed one more for margin—Righty had figured it till he was dizzy—and the choice lay between him and Bubber Jones. The rest of the pre-season pitching roster, except for a couple of reliable firemen, were creaky old gentlemen of thirty-eight like Ponsonby or else green farmhands.

Bubber Jones was tough competition—plenty tough. But Righty Laird was working against the Giants tomorrow.

Righty let out his breath in a long "Whe-e-ew!" He found himself grinning widely because he could not help it. Theo was smiling back at him.

"This," Righty averred, "really calls for an old-fashioned."

THE evening moved faster after that and tended to become blurred. There were parts of it he could never fit together in his recollection afterward. There were other parts he could recall with blistering clarity. Some of it he only read about in the newspapers.

The orchestra swung into the impudent, taunting beat of *Mr. Five by Five*. While they waited for their drinks they danced. Not until he started having fun was Righty aware how lonely he had been on the ranch, how little fun he had had since the doctors told him he was through with baseball for good. He hoped the doctors would see the Giant-Bengal box score tomorrow night.

"It was the frown that threw me," Theo told him. "You look almost dismayingly like Roger now."

Righty started to ask, "Why dismayingly?" but something sidetracked him. Without thinking about it he found himself calling her Theo. He liked the way she said Duncan, too. Hardly anyone,

except sometimes his mother, called him that any more. They got to talking about baseball and he ordered another round of drinks. Before they were half through dinner they were interrupting each other like old friends.

Righty told himself in a dazed way that he did not believe it. Girls did not know about baseball. Not girls who looked like Theo Jordan. He tried to imagine her sitting in the stands drinking pop out of a bottle, screaming at the umpires along with the rest of a Ladies' Day crowd. It could not be done. But then he could not imagine her talking about earned-run averages, either. She even reminded him about the time he made Joe DiMaggio look at a third strike.

"Yeah," Righty laughed. That was in an exhibition game, too, but a big moment all the same. "I worked the count to three and two the next time he came up. Then I decided to out-think him. I figured he would be looking for that sinker again so I crossed him up with my fast ball."

He shook his head with pleasure at the memory.

"I just reared back and poured it in there with everything I had on it. And 'Boom!' Joe blasted that ball over the center field wall and into the next election district."

Righty did not know what time it was when they came out of the restaurant. It must have been quite awhile later. They danced several times more, their steps lacing together with effortless rhythm. Blood was drumming pleasantly in his wrists. He was stirred and exhilarated by something he did not trouble to define, something made up in approximately equal parts of music and laughter and the clean, delicious, unfamiliar fragrance of Theo's hair when it brushed his nose.

Maybe it was also made up of beer and

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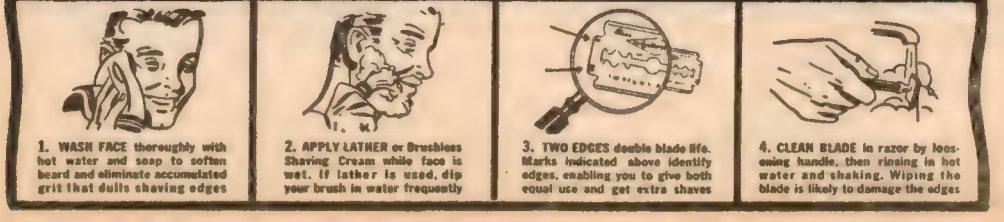


1. WASH FACE thoroughly with hot water and soap to soften beard and eliminate accumulated grit that dulls shaving edges

2. APPLY LATHER or Brushless Shaving Cream while face is wet. If lather is used, dip your brush in water frequently

3. TWO EDGES double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves

4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

old-fashioneds and the seven pounds he had managed to sweat off his lean frame during spring training. But that was not the kind of prudent thought Righty was apt to harbor just then. He was not thinking at all. He felt wonderful. He felt at least a foot taller than usual, and strong enough to pitch both ends of a double-header.

He remembered leaving the restaurant. He remembered the gust of wind that plucked at them as they stood on the sidewalk waiting for a taxicab. It whirled up a miniature dust storm, whipped Theo's curls into a pale froth. A crumpled sheet of newspaper rolled past, skittering like tumbleweed along the gutter. He remembered the cold spatter of raindrops against his cheek and the beat his pulse skipped.

They stared at each other for a wordless instant, then turned to stare at the sky. More drops fell, bigger ones this time, pattering on the pavement.

"It's raining," Righty said.

They ran for the corner. There were no cabs there, or on the next corner either. By that time it indubitably was raining. "Better get in here," he said, pulling her into a lighted doorway. "We'll never get a cab in this."

THE Macedonian Bar and Grill smelled of stale beer and wet overcoats, but it was comparatively warm and dry. They sat at the bar. Glumly, Righty watched the rain sluicing in silver streams down the window pane. The conviction was growing upon him that there went his ball game. He fished in his pocket for a nickel.

"Don't go away anywhere, please?"

Impulsively he was gone, leaving his glass of whiskey and soda untouched on the bar. Theo Jordan looked after him, her expression faintly traced with surprise and concern. If he was jingled, as she suspected, he certainly did not show it.

On the contrary, there was something exceptionally fresh and rugged looking about Duncan Laird. Anyway in comparison with the customers of the Macedonian Bar and Grill. His short sandy hair was rumpled a little. He was so tall that she could watch him over the heads of the men at the bar. He almost had to stoop to fit himself into the telephone booth.

In a moment he was on his way back again, shouldering his way absently past smaller mortals. He lowered himself onto the bar stool beside her.

"Weather report," he quoted sourly. "In the morning, rain. Moderate winds, diminishing gradually. Please invest in war bonds."

Suddenly he grinned. He picked up his whiskey and soda. The highball glass, wrapped in a large brown hand, virtually disappeared.

"Well," he said cheerfully. "It's a break for those Giants. Kind of a break for us, too, wouldn't you say? I can play ball any time. But an evening like this now. Just the two of us, sitting quietly in front of the fire, with the soft patter of the rain on the roof. Me in my beloved old carpet slippers, and you with your knitting. Boys, howdy!"

That should have warned Righty that something had happened to him. Because the strange thing was that he meant it. There had been a moment there, with the first raindrops in his face, when his heart had plummeted like lead.

It had hit bottom with a leaden thump and rebounded immediately, like a child's rubber ball. Anyone might think he was not interested in a starting assignment against the Giants. Anyone but Righty Laird, that was. Righty was still not thinking.

It was some hours later and some miles away from the Macedonian Bar and Grill, with gaps here and there which Righty had not bothered to account for. He was sitting behind the wheel of a rather heavy convertible which he somehow had the impression belonged to Theo Jordan. The

top was up and the windows were closed. It was still raining outside.

Inside it was remarkably peaceful. Theo's left hand was resting in his right, their fingers childishly intertwined. It seemed to Righty that they had been sitting like this for some time. He was pretty sure it was her car. A sentence floated across his mind from somewhere out of the recent jumble.

"Essential driving!" she had snapped. "Essential driving, your grandmother! It's essential that I get home some time tonight."

He thought about the bottle of whiskey. He had bought it from the sloe-eyed bartender for not much more than twice its retail value. He remembered giving someone a drink out of it. The taxi driver—the one who had taken them from the suburban station to the garage. That was somewhere in New Jersey, he believed. Bernardsville, maybe.

The whiskey ought to be in the pocket on her side. He thought about reaching for it, but did not move. It was nice like this, with her warm, thin fingers trustingly twined in his. He noticed that the car was parked at an unusual angle. She's down by the stern, he thought reasonably. The right front wheel was half way up a steep,muddy bank and twisted sharply.

"Where are we?" he asked suddenly.

Theo did not answer for a minute. He began to think she might be asleep. Then she spoke in that faintly husky, musical voice. Righty felt warmer all at once and his heart started beating noticeably against his ribs.

"I don't know. We took the wrong turn somewhere. I ought to know, but I'm afraid I don't."

"Do you care?"

There was a pause while Theo considered.

"No," she said softly. "No, I don't think so."

"Neither do I."

They were shut into a strangely close and intimate little world of their own, with the rain and the darkness outside. Even their silence was companionable. Righty picked up the hand he had been holding and rubbed his cheek against it gently.

Love was something Righty Laird firmly did not believe in. He had said so often in the past two years, at first with bitterness and later with amused derision. There was a girl named Rutheda—he thought the name quaint and lovely, which went to show how badly he was hit—who had been engaged to him for six delirious weeks.

She came to see him twice in the hospital. The next week she wrote him a letter and sent flowers. For a whole agonizing third week there was nothing from her at all. He knew about her marriage to an oil man from east Texas only by what he read in the papers. There was quite a lot of it though, with pictures. Apparently Rutheda's slightly bald bridegroom owned imposing quantities of oil.

Later, quite a long while later, he thought: So, what! Probably she thought I was crocked for good. Not surprising, since the doctors did, too. She was only taking care of herself. What were you looking for, anyway? Faith and hope—or maybe charity?

Righty still thought, when he remembered Rutheda at all, that she might have told him. But that would have taken some guts, a quality hardly required by a girl who knew tricks worth ten of that.

Only now no one needed to talk to Righty Laird about love. He believed—and sometimes said—that it was a racket he could see through. Love was a business, like wholesale dry goods only less ethical. The prettiest girls put over the big deals and wound up with oil wells.

THAT was what Righty thought. Only there was a pleasant blur in his mind just now which was doubtless the liquor

wearing off. Theo did not draw her hand away. Her fingers were slim and strong, smoother than skin credibly could be. Without thinking he pulled her closer and kissed her.

For a long time there was no sound except the soft patter of rain on the canvas top of the roadster.

Naturally Theo Jordan was not the first girl Righty Laird had kissed. She might as well have been, though. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. The violence of his own emotion astonished him.

He raised his head and tried to see her face in the dimness. But her eyes were closed, her lashes smudged dark shadows. The elusive fragrance of her hair was in his nostrils. His heart was beating thickly. An uncomfortable tightness constricted his chest.

"This is it," he said incredulously. "Well, what do you know about that!"

"What?"

"The stuff they write songs about. You know, love."

It was not the liquor, after all. That pleasant blur in his brain, the elation he had been trying all evening to repress, was nothing you could buy in bottles.

"It isn't all moonlight and fluff, either," he said solemnly to Theodora Jordan and the world. "It's something that happens suddenly and then you get engaged. Or—" his mind took a rash forward leap which startled him—"or married."

Theo's voice sounded remote.

"You're crazy."

"That's it," Righty said. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. Now that I think of it, I don't see any darn sense in engagements, either. Just a lot of stalling around. When something like this happens, people might just as well face the facts and get married."

"Don't talk so much," Theo whispered. "You'll spoil it."

She laid her fingers on his lips. Her hand cupped his chin for an instant. Her eyes were still closed, her head resting against his shoulder. There was a look of wondering happiness on her face.

Righty kept still for fear she might stop, but thought it possible he might be going to burst. Tenderly she traced the outline of his brows, the hard planes of his face, the ear set flatly against his head. Then her fingers strayed into the crisp, short hair at the back of his neck. She pulled his head down to hers.

"Kiss me like that again."

It was minutes later when he felt her cheek wet against his. The knowledge shook him like nothing that had ever happened to him before, knowing beyond any need for words that this meant as much to her as it did to him. Gently he released her. Her lashes were starred with tears. He brushed away one tear that squeezed out from under her closed eyelids and trickled down her cheek.

"Darling," she said, and drew a shuddering breath. "Oh, Roger, it has been so long."

FOR a minute Righty did not get it. He was not sure he had heard correctly. He felt as if somebody had hit him over the head with a bat. *Roger,* he thought. Then the numbness passed and cold anger flooded him.

"Look," he said, not raising his voice. "You've got your signs mixed. I'm not Roger."

Her head was still nestled against his collar, her thick fair hair brushing his cheek. She did not move or answer. He peeled her arms from around his neck.

"Maybe I ought to apologize," he said harshly, "but I'm not Roger."

He took hold of her shoulder and gave her a not-too-gentle shake. He was growing angrier by the minute. His head had cleared some and he was beginning to know how much this would hurt. Also, which was even less bearable, he felt like

a fool. He did not like that feeling.

"And don't go passing out on me, either. Do you hear?"

She looked at him then, her lashes still wet with tears that were for Lefty.

"No," she said slowly, the bewildered look fading out of her eyes. "No, you're not Roger. For a minute I thought you were. You're Duncan."

"Now you've got it," he agreed bitterly. "I'm Roger's big brother. Don't you find it embarrassing sometimes, being that absent-minded?"

She did not answer for a minute. She was rummaging in the pockets of her white camel's hair coat, not finding what she wanted.

"Please, have you got a cigarette? I suppose I deserved that. What do you want me to say, that I'm sorry?"

The habit of politeness is remarkably strong. Obediently Righty slapped his own pockets. It added to his annoyance that there were none. Now that she mentioned it he wanted a smoke badly, and they were stuck out here in the underbrush miles from anywhere.

"Not a damn one," he said cheerlessly. "Look, are you engaged to Lefty or something?"

"Not—not exactly."

"What do you mean not exactly? Are you in love with him?"

There was silence.

"Skip it," Righty said rudely. "I get it all right. One of those kiss and run plays. The boy always was fast around the bases."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" He went on in a mild, conversational tone. "By the way, did you know that Lefty's been gonged? That's what he called it—something he picked up from the Limeys. They gave him the Distinguished Flying Cross."

Theo had been staring bleakly at the instrument board. Her head came up with a quick flash of interest. "Really!" she exclaimed. "How marvelous! He would do something like that, of course. I knew he would. When?"

"Two months ago," Righty informed her heavily. "I take it you haven't heard from him. You're not exactly engaged. I suppose it's one of those things you call an understanding. What do you think I mean by a kiss and run play?"

Maybe it was rough on Theo, but it happened to be the truth. Lefty was a good kid. There was not, Righty thought, an ounce of real harm in him. Usually it was just that he tried to slide out of things without hurting any feelings. Still, if Righty had a dollar for every dame who had imagined herself practically engaged to Roger Laird, he would not have to worry about the mortgage. It twisted something in his chest to think of Theo Jordan being just another of Lefty's dime-a-dozen conquests.

He almost added, out of his own pain: You and all the other bird-brain blondes between here and San Antonio. Probably by now he could make it Medjez-el-Bab.

Only he did not say it. At least, remembering all this later and wincing, he did not think he had. He did remember saying, "I've done a lot of peculiar things for that boy, but this is the first time I ever stood-in for him in one of his affairs."

The contempt in her voice cut sharply even through the fog of his recollections next day.

"You certainly are not Roger," she said coldly. "I've never heard him say a word about you that wasn't decent and generous. Whatever you want to think about us is your own business. At least I haven't given you any reason to call it an affair."

That was true enough, Righty knew, but he was still too sore to care. He wanted to hurt her as much as he had been hurt himself.

"How would you know?" he said brutally. "You're drunk."

Theo did not answer that at all. Righty stayed slumped under the wheel, glowering at the knobs on the car radio. The silence dragged out painfully.

"Well," Theo stirred at last in her own corner of the seat, "are there any more insults you can think of? I seem to have no choice but to listen. I can't very well get out and walk home—although the idea has a great deal of charm. Or," she added after a moment, "if you are quite finished, maybe you could start the car."

Righty jerked impatiently at the handle of the car door. Her level voice, putting him in the wrong, doubled his sense of injury and injustice. The hell with her, he thought furiously. If he was polluting the atmosphere around here, he guessed he could get the hell out.

HE started to set foot in the road and thought better of it. It was very black and water stood in the deep ruts. They were on a wooded country road. He started fumbling in the side pocket. There ought to be a flashlight in the car.

"What on earth are you doing?"

Righty maintained what he thought was a dignified silence. His hand encountered the pint of whiskey and he prudently put it in his pocket. There was a flashlight in the glove compartment. He appropriated it without comment.

"Start the car yourself, sweetheart," he advised. "I'm blowing."

This was one for the book, he thought, sloshing doggedly along the road. This must set a record of some kind. He was probably the only man in the world who ever went for a ride with a beautiful blonde and ended by walking home himself.

He had turned up the collar of his coat, but water was dripping down his neck from his soaked hair. Sometime in the course of the evening he had lost his hat. He stepped in a puddle over his shoe top and swore in a perfunctory way. Mere physical discomfort was nothing, the way he was feeling.

Behind him around a little bend in the road he could hear Theo Jordan trying to start the car. The hum of the starter, the crescendo whine of the engine racing while the wheels spun in the mud, the buck the roadster gave as the engine stalled. She did it again.

Righty turned half around and paused irresolutely, listening. Then he thought again, The hell with it. He had taken plenty for one evening. Besides, you never got anywhere with women spoiling them. Look at the way Lefty dished out punishment and they came back crying for more. Look how nice he, Righty, had been to —to Rutheda.

He trudged on again, slipping on the muddy road, following the faint and wavering beam of a decidedly *ersatz* flashlight. Funny thing, it dawned on him, he actually had to fumble a minute for Rutheda's name. It was a kind of silly, affected name, too, now that he could look at it coolly.

Only remembering Rutheda coolly was something pretty surprising in itself. He tried to call up a picture of her fragile dark-eyed loveliness. He got nothing convincing for the effort. Instead there was Theo Jordan in his mind, so sharp and unexpected and warmly vital that he almost groaned. Firmly he thrust her out again.

Grow up, Laird, he admonished himself. Can't you learn anything when they beat you over the head with it? Are you going to be a sucker till you're sixty?

Around another bend in the road the trees on either side began to thin out. There was no sound of a car anywhere behind him. He was walking down grade and making better time because someone had dumped a few loads of gravel on this part of the road. At the foot of the hill it joined a hard-surface highway. Out from under the shade of the trees it was

lighter. There were no gates, but there were gateposts set at either side of the road, and Righty made out the whitish gleam of an aluminum letter-box.

They had turned into some sort of private lane evidently. He wondered if it had been his own idea, or if Theo thought she was home, or what.

Righty halted and leaned against one of the gateposts. On his left, which he felt instinctively was the way home, the highway ran up a curving gradient for perhaps a quarter of a mile and disappeared around the shoulder of a hill. In the other direction it straightened out. He could see quite a distance along it but there was no traffic in sight.

Righty wondered where he was, and how far it might be to the nearest railway station, and what were his chances of thumbing a ride if he just stood here. It had stopped raining but his clothes were clinging to him damply. The clammy chill of a late night or early morning hour began to penetrate his bones. He could not tell which, because his watch had stopped at five minutes past midnight.

The chill called to mind the whiskey. Righty shook the bottle hopefully, unscrewed the cap. He shuddered slightly as the whiskey seared his throat. It was rye of the most nameless and degraded ancestry, but it warmed his stomach pleasantly. This is a God forsaken spot to be in, he thought.

He remembered the dark road winding up into the woods behind him. He must have been almost an hour walking down to the highway. What had happened to Theo, anyway? It seemed unlikely from the state the road was in that it led anywhere, or that she could have got the roadster out any other way but this. Maybe she really had been unable to work it out of the mud.

Righty stood stock still, holding the whiskey bottle in his hand. It wasn't a very good place to leave a girl, he supposed. Even if you wanted to get rid of her for good, there were probably more humane ways. Also, he recalled, seeing her suddenly through the eyes of any thug who might happen along, that her father had rather a lot of money, and that Theo and the roadster both looked it.

Dammit, he thought resignedly, my better nature is going to assert itself. It was another weary hour's tramp back, but Righty guessed he would have to do it.

Righty still had the bottle in his hand. He had no more than turned and faced up the hill when the drone of a motor sounded faintly in the distance. The sound grew plainer, changed tempo as she shifted into high on the gravelled stretch. Righty grinned when the long aristocratic nose of Theo Jordan's roadster emerged cautiously at the top of the hill.

The grin came off with startled suddenness. The roadster charged down the nar-

row road, gathering speed. It barely checked momentum as it hit the level, slewed into a sharp left turn with a spatter of gravel. The wind of its passing ruffled Righty's hair.

She had seen him, he knew. For an instant the hooded beam of the headlights had been full on him, picking out the white triangle of his shirt and the pale gray slacks.

"Well," Righty said aloud.

He stared after the roadster as it soared up the black rise of the highway, swinging too far out for the right turn at the shoulder. A glow of pale light washed around the hill coming toward him. Righty blinked. He had no time to do more before the scream of brakes and a rending clash of metal shattered the night air.

Righty's heart bounded into his throat and stayed there. He could not see Theo Jordan's car at all. The automobile careening down the hill, apparently out of control, was a black sedan with only one headlight. Sideswipe, he thought. Maybe a cracked axle. For an instant he thought it was going over the embankment.

Then it responded to the wheel, swerved toward him and away again in a long, skidding S-turn, and crashed through a fence on the opposite side of the highway. It was still more or less upright when it settled into the ditch.

Righty did not even know he had dropped the bottle until he heard a clink of glass in the roadway behind him. He was sprinting up the hill in a sweat of terror. Something was going on in his mind that was faster than thinking, or maybe just simpler.

He did not see the roadster at first. His heart gave a sickening lurch. Then he saw the tire marks streaked across the wet asphalt and thought: How did she ever manage that?

The heavy convertible was off the road on the other side of the rise, clinging at an improbable angle to the soft dirt shoulder. The right side of the hood was mashed into accordion pleating. Jeepers, Righty thought, she passed him on the left.

He made his way around the outside of the car, picking his way carefully on the dirt embankment. It was raw, new earth slippery from the rain. The wheels on this side seemed to be resting on not very much of it, at that. It was fifteen or twenty feet to the bottom of the cut. He opened the door.

Theo was still clinging to the wheel. Her face was white, the look she turned on him dazed and uncomprehending, but she seemed to be all right.

"Move over," Righty said.

There was no time for explanations, even if he had breath left to make them. Behind them down the hill rose the whine of a siren. One thing was sure, Righty figured, that guy in the sedan had not seen him. The driver of a car behaving like that would not be looking at the scenery.

"Move over," he said again, emphasizing his demand with an impatient push. "Dammit, do you want them to think you were driving?"

Theo seemed to get it then, because she moved over. Righty stepped up onto the running board and ducked under the low top. As he did so the car settled majestically. One moment there was solid metal under his foot and the next there was emptiness. Something fetched him a blinding crack on the head.

THE first thing he thought was that he had been on a bender. His pillow was missing. When he turned his head a hammer inside his skull set up a steady pounding. After a minute it stopped.

Righty tried to sit up and regretted it instantly. "Ouch," he moaned. He put his head back carefully where the pillow ought to be and waited for the anvil chorus to subside. He must have got pretty badly bent, too.

Then he thought about Ray Schumlin

and things began to come back to him. Very disquieting things. He opened his eyes cautiously. It was daylight and not very bright, but it seared painfully across his eyeballs, which were as tender as boiled onions. He forgot the pain and stared out of them anyway.

Duncan Laird had never been in jail before, but he had seen movies often enough to recognize the set. He eased himself around and stared out the barred window at a concrete areaway. They had filed him in the basement of somebody's county courthouse.

Jeepers, he thought, this isn't right. I'm the steady one. Even Lefty never got himself into this much of a mess. Someone got the script mixed. He was still staring at the window. It was minutes before he realized what held his attention. The little patch of sky showing over the top of the areaway was a pale early morning blue. A pale clear blue.

In the morning, rain. It appeared that everything, even the Telephone Company, had let him down. Would they play the Giants after all, he wondered? Maybe he could bribe his keeper and hear it on the radio.

Righty had expected Ray Schumlin to be sore. Maybe not enough to bring it out in the open, just enough to ride him some. Now all bets were off. Now he had something substantial to be sore about.

Only, it dawned on Righty somewhat tardily, he would kind of like to know what it was himself. What was he supposed to be in the clink for? The last thing he remembered clearly was standing at the side of a road and shaking a whiskey bottle to see if there was any left. Judging by that, and the way his head felt, there was a liquor charge in this somewhere.

This reflection brought Mr. Jordan to mind. Suffering Saints, he thought, the Deacon was probably on the telephone right now trying to trade him to Philadelphia. For a secondhand rubbing table.

The lovely and disdainful image of Theo Jordan came back to him, and proved too painful to contemplate. Righty groaned and held his head. If the things he could not remember were any worse than those he did recall, he hoped he never lived to hear about them.

He jerked his head up suddenly, a look of surprise and injury on his face. Gingerly he inspected the lump over his ear. It was what the newspapers called contused and abraded, and also hurt like blazes when he touched it. There was some dried blood in his hair. Righty decided it was nothing serious. Now where the devil, he asked himself, did he suppose that came from?

He walked over to the door and looked through the bars. There was nothing to be seen but the cell across the corridor. He shook the bars without result. Finally he gave the door a couple of kicks.

"Hi!" he bawled. The syllable exploded inside his skull. Righty winced and tried again. "Hi! Anybody home in this joint?"

The shout provoked an answering catcall, an indelicately phrased request to pipe down, and at last a shambling jail attendant in khaki work pants and sneakers.

"I want a lawyer," Righty stated in the tones of a young man who knew his constitutional rights.

The attendant regarded him silently, without enthusiasm.

"You got one," he said finally. "He's in the Judge's chambers now. I guess he'll see you when he's a-mind to."

THE lawyer, to Righty's considerable surprise, was one he had seen when he signed his contract in Jordan's office. The real contract, that was. Not the blank one for the newspaper photographers. His name was something like Savery, and might even have been Savery.

He did learn some other things he badly wanted to know. Such as how—or perhaps where—was Miss Jordan? And what town was this, anyhow? And what was he under arrest for? Miss Jordan was well and the town one he had never heard of before. Savery smiled at the last question.

Righty did not like him. He had a dimple in his chin and a mustache trimmed like Governor Dewey's. His smile was faintly condescending.

"Driving without a license," he enumerated. "Driving while intoxicated. Disorderly conduct. Obstructing an officer of the law in the performance of his duties. Resisting arrest."

Righty kept his expression dead-pan. Actually he felt somewhat stunned, but he was damned if this little squirt would find it out.

"Yeah," he said mildly. "How much time do I get off for good behavior?"

"Oh, it's not so bad as that. Mr. Jordan has a good deal of influence around here, you know. Also, Judge Cummings is an ardent Bengal fan himself. We have arranged for a hearing *in camera*. I think I may say you have nothing to worry about."

That's what you think, Righty said bitterly to himself. It was hard to see how he could have done all those things without knowing about it. And without getting any more marked up. Still he knew they could call it disorderly conduct if you said "hell and damnation." He supposed if you jostled a cop there was nothing to keep him from claiming you were resisting arrest. He said suddenly to Savery:

"I wasn't driving while intoxicated."

Savery smiled politely, not quite concealing his scepticism.

"I was out cold. Look at that, if you don't believe me."

The lawyer examined his scalp wound and seemed delighted.

"My dear fellow," he said, "that's splendid. Particularly as—this is between ourselves—the arresting officer found no liquor in the car. Now if you will just leave the explaining to me when we talk to Judge Cummings—"

Righty almost asked what car.

He caught himself in time and decided to let Savery explain that, too. He had just been told to keep his mouth shut and try not to put his foot in it. The hearing gave him a rough outline of what happened last night. It was enough to make a fellow sign the pledge, too.

It appeared that he had been driving Theodora Jordan's roadster when they sideswiped a sedan. Tire marks on the paving showed they were on the wrong side of the road. No one was hurt and Mr. Jordan had agreed to settle the civil claims. The license matter was disposed of easily. Righty was a licensed driver in another state, and still within the legal limit for taking out a license here.

The Judge listened to the rather sullen testimony of Officer Mullane, who seemed to feel that Righty had handled him rather roughly, and heard Savery's arguments. He peered over his glasses at the bump on Righty's head and deplored the lack of medical evidence.

"Thirty days in the county jail," he pronounced sentence. Then he beamed paternally. "Sentence suspended. Well, young man, so you think you can fill Lefty Laird's shoes with the Bengals?"

If it smelled—and Righty thought it did—who was he to complain? He stood on the courthouse steps with Savery and tasted freedom.

"This is certainly white of Mr. Jordan. I thought he would be pretty—well, pretty upset anyway."

"I think you could say he is—" Savery hesitated, and Righty found something malicious and faintly chilling about his smile—"upset, as you put it. He is very anxious, however, to avoid further scan-

dal." That condescending smile again.

"Scandal?"

There was something in Righty's voice, just saying the word, that made Savery give ground a little. "That may be putting it a bit strongly, the way you and I might look at the thing. But not when you know Mr. Jordan and the way he feels about that girl. I forgot you hadn't seen the papers yet."

Savery unlocked his car and slid in under the wheel. He took a couple of folded newspapers which had been stuffed down beside the driver's seat and handed them to Righty.

"They were pretty decent about soft-pedaling the liquor angle. But of course you can't miss the implication. You can see why Mr. Jordan might be—er—upset."

Righty could. He could, anyway, after the type had unshuffled itself in front of his eyes and began to make sense, after he was able to comprehend that it meant Theodora Jordan and Duncan Laird, and not just the featureless people who do the queer things you are always reading about in newspapers.

The first one was the worst. It was a late edition of a morning tabloid which sold by millions. The paper was folded back to page four and the headline, which was large and black, said:

SOCIETY ELOPEMENT CRASHES.

The story started out:

One of the surprise romances of the year was disclosed prematurely last night. . .

"Elopement!" Righty yelled, turning on the lawyer. "Who said anything about an elopement?"

Savery took his eyes off the traffic long enough to slant a queer look at the big sandy-haired young man beside him. "You did, as nearly as I could learn. One of the local newspaper boys was down there last night when they brought you in. Miss Jordan denied it when they reached her later by telephone, but the story was on the press wires by that time."

"I couldn't have," Righty protested. "She's—"

He broke off abruptly. What he had been going to say was that Theo was romancing about Lefty. That had boiled up from somewhere below the level of his conscious mind. Not once, since he woke up this morning in jail, had he thought about Theo and Lefty. He had been too occupied with his own troubles. Yet it must have been in his mind all the time.

Was it possible, he wondered, that he had made some dumb crack—maybe something about Theo's marrying a Laird anyway—that the reporter had been able to seize upon? Once a newspaper man had told him that the thing was to get the story. Nobody read the denials later.

"She's what?"

"Nothing," Righty mumbled. "I was just thinking. Look, where is the Jordan place, anyway?"

"Over near Bernardsville. Good Lord, if that was where you were aiming for you overshot. You were about thirty miles past it and pointing for Maryland. Quite a ride you went for."

Nothing to the ride he was going for now, Righty thought bitterly. Not to mention what he still had coming to him. He unfolded the other newspaper, an early edition of an influential morning sheet. It carried half a column of biographical detail, but not so much offensive innuendo. The story ended by saying:

"Miss Jordan, reached by telephone at her home near Bernardsville, denied an earlier published report that she and Laird were on their way to Maryland to be married."

There was even some stuff on the sport pages. One of the tabloid columnists quipped: "Wonder what 'Deacon' Jordan, who wants his ballplayers tucked into bed

early, will say to the house Righty Laird is keeping? And in company of the Deacon's eye-filling daughter, at that. The promising young fire-baller, who chalked up three nifty scoreless innings against Boston, likes the bright spots almost as well as his famous brother Lefty used to. See news columns of this esteemed journal for details."

Righty began to feel sick at his stomach. His head was still aching, though not the way it had before Savery sent out for black coffee and bromo-seltzer. That had got the hangover under control. It did nothing for the dull pain above his starboard ear. He wondered if the Judge had done him a favor by suspending that sentence. From where he was sitting now the county jail looked pretty attractive.

Savery obligingly dropped him at the hotel. "Thanks," Righty said. Then, because he had not been with a big league ball club long enough to feel that he ought to get everything on the cuff, he mumbled something about the fee.

The lawyer looked surprised, but for the kind of retainer his firm received from Frederick L. Jordan he could afford to be gracious.

"This is on the house," he said, smiling. "Don't do any more talking though, not even to yourself."

Righty still did not like him.

THE stands at Tillman Park were not more than half filled. That was because of the weather, probably, and uncertainty until the last minute whether the game would be played or not. The infield was all right, because it had been covered with tarpaulin. The turf of the outfield—a carpet of emerald velvet laid down at fabulous cost to Mr. Jordan—was still soggy from rain.

More work for the pitcher, Righty thought. More of those long line drives would turn into hits. No outfielder would risk a bad ankle making impossible tries today, not in just an exhibition game.

That was the kind of thing he was thinking about, or trying to think about, in order to control the jitters that set the muscles in his diaphragm quivering. The stands, even half filled, held better than twenty thousand people. Righty tried to tell himself that big league ball was just baseball, the same game they played in San Francisco, but it didn't mean a thing.

He sat on the bench in the Bengal dugout and listened to the announcements over the public address system. For the first time he was wearing the crisp white monkey suit which was the club's home uniform. He felt proud and frightened and sick with worry all at the same time. He looked down at the blue Bengal lettering on his shirt. Maybe it was the last time he would wear it, too.

The Bengals trotted out onto the field and the subdued surf-roar of the crowd swelled to a thunder of greeting. Righty shut his eyes for a minute because they were suddenly stinging with tears. When he opened them again, Rucker, the Giant center fielder, was setting himself at the plate. Chubby Tim Corcoran took a last look around at the outfielders. Then he stepped up on the pitcher's mound to start the ball game which should have been Righty Laird's.

Corcoran might be getting old, but he had the experience that goes with stiffening joints—sometimes. Righty tried to watch. Maybe he could learn something while he was sitting here. Something, that is, besides the virtues of abstinence and keeping his neck in.

For three innings Tiny Tim held the Giants scoreless. His fast ball might be fast only by courtesy, but he mixed them like a master. His knuckle ball—and Righty noticed that he used it rarely, only when he really needed it—seemed to totter up to the plate. Ott got hold of a piece of one to open the second inning, advancing to second on Barna's sacrifice. They could

not work him around, and that was the scoring threat for the first three innings.

Meanwhile the Bengals punched over a run in the second. Lohrman issued a pass to Ken Prince. A long double by Drinkwater scored the speedy little shortstop all the way from first. He made it sliding in a cloud of dust and the crowd roared. The Bengal fans really had pennant fever this year.

Shumlin brought Bubber Jones in from the bullpen to start the fourth inning. This really filled Righty's cup of bitterness to the brim. Jones was short, almost a head shorter than Righty, but he had shoulders that would look good on a right guard at Minnesota. His arms were disproportionately long, but he could whip that ball in there so it smoked.

Righty figured that was about all he had. It was enough to get him through the fourth inning without material damage, though. The score was still 1-0 when the Bengals wound up their half of the inning.

The fifth really started something cooking. Bubber opened the proceedings by tagging Witek and the second baseman trotted down to first rubbing his shoulder. With the Bengal infield drawn in looking for a bunt, Sid Gordon crossed them up. He smacked a solid single into short center field. With men on first and third and nobody out, Captain Mel Ott stepped up to the plate.

Righty Laird jumped as if somebody had jabbed him with a hatpin.

"Yes, you!" Shumlin said. "Get on out to the bullpen and don't spare the horses."

Righty went with his head spinning. The lean left-hander, Chet Fillmore, had got up from the bench in the bullpen and was throwing doggedly. Behind him Righty heard the sharp crack of wood meeting leather. Bubber must have made the mistake of grooving one of those fast balls twice in the same place to Ott.

It looked like a home run. Without breaking his jog-trot Righty watched the ball as it arced toward the left field stands. It would have been a home run last season. This year's dead ball took a sudden nose dive, yards short. By the time they dug it out from under the bench in the Giants' bullpen two runs were across the plate and Ott was coming into third standing up.

Righty poured in pitches, trying to get the hop on his fast ball that meant it was right, trying to work up a sweat. His hands were wet, so wet he smeared them across the front of his shirt, but the rest of his skin remained obstinately dry. He was tightened up like a banjo string.

It took self-control, but Righty remembered to walk slowly on the way in to the mound. It seemed as if he had thrown only four or five pitches. Muscles twitched in the calves of his legs. He simply had to relax, loosen up a little, on the long trudge in from the bullpen.

Throwing a fast ball, trying to pour it on when he was as cold as this, could ruin his arm for good. But he had to throw his fast ball. His curve was pretty good, but he couldn't curve the Giants dizzy all afternoon. This wasn't the Coast League. Jeepers, these were the Giants. Thinking about it like that almost scared him into a sweat.

He had not thought of Theo Jordan since the start of the fifth inning. He did not know she was in the park. If the sudden sight of her had not taken him completely by surprise he wouldn't have stopped.

Righty was walking past the field boxes wondering what the plot was, anyway. What was Shumlin's idea in putting him in a spot like this? The noise of the crowd washed in his ears and he did not even hear it. He just glanced up and there she was.

She was so close he could lean over and touch her, and she was beautiful. But that

(Please turn to page 113)

LOVE for a Marine

By A. P. COOKE

Lola promised to wait for Barry, but a lieutenant sent her orchids to make her change her mind.

LOLA FAIRCLOTH halted her stroll with Barry in the shadow of a great oak on dimmed-out Bay Street which fringed the waterfront of quaint old Beaufort in South Carolina. Across Port Royal Sound a few lights blinked cautiously from Parris Island, and Lola had the sickening sensation that they were beckoning fingers, commanding Corporal Barry Wilmer to leave her side and return to his barracks at the immense Marine Corps Base.

It would be cruel, she thought, to have to part at that moment with so many things unsaid.

She raised her quivering lips. "Barry, dearest," she murmured, "I'll wait. I promise."

Her hand was being gripped fiercely by his and she knew that she had not won yet.

Barry's voice, low and pleading, said, "But, honey, it may be for so long. It isn't as if we had just met each other, like some couples. It's something we've counted on since high school."

Lola elevated her midnight blue eyes to meet his and her black closely-cut curls framed her pert heart-shaped face in the softness of the May night. She sighed deeply. "I know. But you know I love you and only you. Barry, we should be sensible."

He choked off her protest. "Sensible?" he repeated, a rising question in his voice. "Is war sensible? Is anything sensible these days? Look, honey, if every Marine, every soldier or sailor married his girl before he went overseas, this war would be finished in half the time. Every man would want to rush home to her, wouldn't he?"

Lola smiled in the darkness, fell in step with the tall slender man with the blond hair, a year older than herself. "Are you implying, darling, that I won't wait for you unless we are married?"

He stroked her hand gently as they walked on, arm in arm.

"Well," he argued, "being over there in the administration building at Parris Island with all of those lieutenants flirting with you—"

She raised her hand to press the tips of her fingers on his lips. "Not jealous, are you?" she asked, "because if you are, forget it. There's only one there who has given me a second glance."

Barred from the U.S.O. because of rank, the lieutenant waited for Lola, who led the band.

"Yeah. I know," Barry muttered with an ill-concealed grunt. "That rich chap. Garden, or something."

"Lieutenant Jardin," she corrected, "and he can have all the money in the world, as far as I care."

"But I still wish you'd say yes. We may have only a day or so."

As they neared Beaufort High School, from which Lola and Barry had been graduated a few years before, she guided him across the new spring grass to the old familiar bench under a live oak tree, whose leaves formed a lacy pattern in the moonlight. That bench had meant much to them in the past.

Lola took both of his hands in hers. Her voice came as smooth as the velvet night. "Barry, dearest," she whispered, "ours isn't a love that can be measured by kisses. To me it is something far more magnificent, grander. Something to endure for so long that a few little months before we really have each other won't make any difference."

His voice was husky. "Maybe you're right, honey. You most generally are."

Even in the moonlight she knew his dark brown eyes were glowing with tenderness and she relished the warmth of his arms about her again. But it gave her a shuddery feeling. Somehow, Lola Faircloth, now twenty, realized she had won something in Barry's veiled admission, but she had lost something, too. The loss was reflected in her silent words, "Next week he may be Lord knows where."

Impulsively, she buried her face against the pleated pocket of his blouse, not caring that his marksmanship medal with its three extra bangles was branding her forehead. When she raised her eyes, they were starry and her voice was unsteady, but the words came tumbling out.

"Do take good care of yourself, sweet, and when you come back, I'll be right here waiting and we can go sailing again." She paused for breath, then added softly, "I'll remember the Marine Corps' motto, *Semper Fidelis*. I'll always be faithful, too."

Barry held her close, and when she raised her ardent lips, his met hers demandingly.

As they approached the depot for the bus to Parris Island, Barry remarked, "Honey, after I'm gone why don't you and Sylvia and those other gals get up that orchestra you've been talking about? Gosh knows they could use it at the U.S.O. Club."

"I'll do it," she pledged. "I'll see Sylvia tomorrow."

SOMEHOW, through that sleepless night, Barry seemed closer to her than ever before; even more so than in those years when they were growing up together. As a lanky school girl she had watched him play football and basketball, cheering him. In the summer she had been his "crew" in the snipe boat races down the Sound. While other girls chided her that Barry Wilmer acted as if he owned her, she had retorted, "I can't think of anyone I'd rather be owned by."

His manner toward her alternately thrilled and puzzled her. He was possessive without being proprietary, but always in time of grave decisions, he generally followed her wishes, as he had done tonight.

During her first Christmas holidays after graduation, she had been impatient for him to return home from his Sophomore year at Clemson. But when, on that fateful December Sunday that Pearl Harbor became an American fighting word, Lola knew in her heart that Barry would not be returning to college.

Quietly and methodically, as he did everything, he drove his battered flivver over to Parris Island and enlisted in the Marines. In less than a year he was a corporal, and now, while his unit was on the alert for embarkation, he was up for

another stripe. Lola knew he would make it; knew, too, that he could be a Marine gunner or even a "mustang" officer—up from the ranks—before the war was over. Yes, Lola was very proud of Barry.

When she reached her desk in the administration building the following morning, Sylvia Swain greeted her with a long face and whispered, "Take a deep breath. Barry's outfit shoved off during the night. The transport was waiting offshore, but it's a terrific secret, of course."

Lola gripped the desk unsteadily. It seemed as if the world were collapsing around her in slow motion. Sylvia patted her arm but withdrew her hand as Lieutenant Bates Jardin stepped beside them, a sheaf of papers in his hand.

From a great distance she heard him say, "Morning, Lola. Please make four carbons of these rosters as quickly as possible. They're confidential, of course."

She managed, "Yes, lieutenant," and slumped into her chair. She scanned the list for Barry's name. There it was, deep in the W's: Wilmer, Barrett Benjamin, Sgt.

Not even the thrill of the swift promotion could counteract the dazed feeling of lostness which remained with her for days.

Sylvia and five other girls from her old high school music crowd agreed with Lola that a girls' dance band would be fun and in keeping with the times, and of course she gave Barry full credit for the idea. It helped her to think, I'll be doing something extra special for Barry. Without a dissenting murmur, the girls seconded Sylvia's suggestion that the orchestra should be called Lola and Her Marinettes.

After many evenings of practise and after several members of the famous Marine Band at the Island had called the girls a solid combo, they were ready for their debut in the immense U.S.O. center in Beaufort.

But Lola, with reason enough, found herself alternately happy and miserable that night. If Barry only could be there to see and to hear! But he was not, and the only two letters she had received from him indicated he was in some remote outpost in the South Pacific. Thousands of miles separated them. It was not a pleasant thought.

For the debut she dipped extravagantly into her savings and came up with a delectable confection of a gown, a swirling, billowy chiffon in dove gray with a bodice of delphinium, Barry's favorite shade of blue. It moulded her lovely figure and flattered her blue eyes and dark hair. Sylvia, a gorgeous blonde, wore red. Grouped together on the small stage in the service men's club, the seven girls resembled an enlarged nosegay from an old-fashioned garden.

As Lola took her place, arms raised for attention, an expectant hush spread over the crowd. When all was quiet, she tossed her curls in a joyful gesture, brought her baton sharply down as the Marinettes broke spiritedly into *The Halls of Montezuma,* while a hundred or more khaki-clad Leathernecks acknowledged the salute with whistling and applause.

The dancing couples increased in number and Lola's midnight blue eyes smiled, but without gayety. In each couple she saw not merely a Marine and his girl, but herself and Barry. Only there was no Barry tonight.

For the waltz just before intermission, Lola had chosen *Kiss Me Again,* always one of Barry's favorites. A reverent hush filled the hall, for was not the title the hope or wish of every boy and girl there?

She marked the finale with a carefree fillip of her baton and a tornado of applause welled up. Sylvia called, "We're in, kid!" And Lola, her back to the dancers momentarily, nodded excited agreement. She saw Sylvia's eyes become fixed on the crowd, watched them grow to twice their normal size. Lola did an about-face

quickly. Her eyes widened in surprise.

Mrs. Housman, the senior hostess, was advancing with a transparent square box in her hands. Flowers, of course.

"For you, my dear," Mrs. Housman said, handing them to Lola, "and well deserved, too."

Lola breathed a hurried thanks as Sylvia and Marge Singman joined her. Sylvia cried, "Orchids! White orchids, too. But who?"

Lola's fingers dashed toward the card. The engraved side was very formal. In square letters it said: Lieutenant Bates Jardin, U.S.M.C. The other side bore this writing:

> U.S.O. rules won't let an officer in. Won't you dash out for a moment and submit to some humble admiration?

Wordless, Lola felt herself turning beet red. It was nice of him to remember, she thought, but his summons was nothing less than nerve and, as she considered it, too brazenly personal. She spread her hands in a gesture of despair.

Sylvia said sympathetically, "I know how you feel, exactly. But you've got to thank him. Twenty dollars worth of orchids don't just happen. After all, he's one of your bosses, not mine."

"I suppose so," Lola agreed. She thought, It would be difficult for any girl to ignore Bates Jardin, once he had made up his mind.

She moved slowly through the patio as Lieutenant Jardin got out of his shiny coupe at the curb and came to meet her, his dark eyes shining in a self-satisfied way. Every dark hair in his head was in meticulous order.

"You," he began, "can't possibly be the same little girl who is a mouse of a secretary by day. You're a dream of sheer loveliness by night."

Lola murmured, "Thanks, lieutenant. The flowers are lovely. I don't know how to thank you."

Something about his eyes urged caution. "I'll show you how, later," he suggested. "You'll be through by midnight, won't you?"

"But I couldn't go any place," she protested. "We'll be dead tired and I have to be at work tomorrow at eight."

"True," he said condescendingly. "Another night, then?"

Lola bit her upper lip fiercely.

"The flowers were lovely," she repeated. "I'm going to divide them among the other girls."

"No," he said. "They were all for you."

She gave him one of her best smiles. "Do you mind excusing me now? Intermission is almost over."

Bates said, "You can't be so cold as you'd like to make me believe, Lola. Or are you one of those who is saving herself for Bill?"

Lola smiled again, "What do you think?" She hurried off across the patio without waiting for his answer.

AT THE administration building next morning, she was showered with compliments about the band. It gave her a delicious feeling to know that in their small way the girls were adding something to the recreation of men in the service. But her elation was short-lived.

When she returned from lunch, Sylvia said, "Please call your mother right away. She seems awfully upset."

Her mother's voice was distraught. "Honey, there's—there's been some news—about Barry. His mother heard—the telegram just came. It says he's—missing—"

Lola was not aware until later that three of the girls in the office had rushed to her side, attracted by the clatter of the telephone falling on the floor after she had fainted. It seemed, when she opened her eyes in the rest room, that a stabbing bolt of lightning had struck her down,

paralyzing every thought, every muscle. She remembered moaning, "No, no. It can't be true. Oh, it can't."

Colonel Greenleigh, the base adjutant, directed that she be taken home and in the two terrible days which followed Lola memorized every word of Barry's last letter, received more than a month before. The most piercing, the most poignant part was:

> When I get back, darling, I'll have a lot more stripes and a fat pay rating and whenever I get my first furlough, that will be your signal to alert the bridesmaids. If you still want them.

And yet, she reasoned, there was something dreadfully and uncomfortably rational in what Colonel Greenleigh had told her: "When the department reports a man missing, Miss Faircloth, it's a hundred-to-one chance that he will ever show up, although many do, in time."

She heard the same refrain, despairingly, almost daily in the administration building. But she wished that Bates Jardin would not be so ghoulish about it.

Once he said, "I can't stand the thought of a beautiful, gay and vivacious girl putting on widow's weeds when she is barely twenty-one. Why, your whole life is ahead of you."

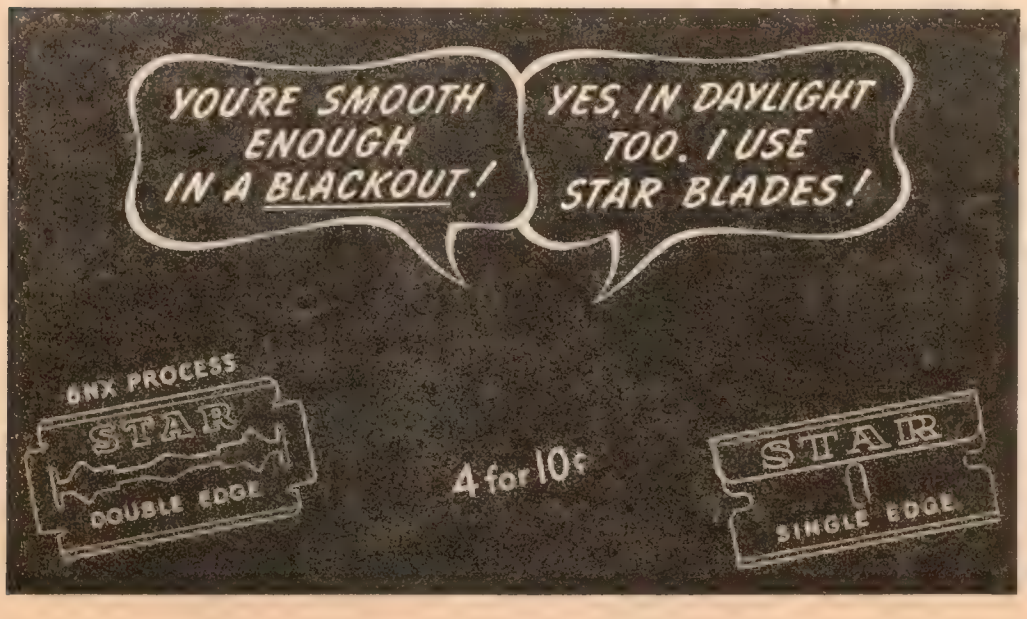
"Maybe," she mumbled distantly, but without spirit.

But, she told herself over and over, it would take a giant's hand, manipulating an enormous eraser to obliterate the memory of Barry Wilmer.

In the empty weeks which followed Lola carried on bravely with the Marinettes, although her heart was not in it. Their fame had spread and now they were being asked to appear at Officers' Club gatherings at Ribault Inn, a gay night spot not far from Parris Island.

It was, she learned later, Bates Jardin who had arranged these appearances. In a way, she was grateful. Not so much for the engagements but because it indicated, in a way, that Bates was becoming more sympathetic, although she was reluctant to admit it.

Packing up their instruments after one Saturday night's dance at the Inn, Lola realized with a shock that Sylvia and Gwen and Marge had dates. In fact, all the members of the Marinettes had dates except herself.



She had braced her shoulders mentally against the lonely ride home in a taxi when Bates approached her. "Give you a lift?" he asked casually. Lola admitted, "It would help. I don't know when I can get a taxi."

HIS car idled at less than thirty miles an hour down Spanish Moss Trail, skirting an inlet of Beaufort River where the moon was doing its best to silverplate the rippled surface.

"I've been wanting to talk to you," Bates began, guiding the wheel with his left hand, while his right arm rested over the back of her seat.

"You see me almost every day in the office," Lola said.

"Not that kind of talk, Lola. Don't you realize that you've got me on pins and needles?"

There was a tiny smile on her lips in the soft darkness.

"Then you must be very uncomfortable."

"Let me put it another way. Why do you dislike me?"

"But I don't, Bates. I like you well enough. You just seem to forget—"

"You won't let me forget about him," he answered sharply. "Don't you realize I'm head-over-heels crazy about you? Don't you know I want to marry you this very minute, if you'd say so?"

She laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Please, Bates," she pleaded, but he would not be stilled.

"Don't you know I can give you everything you could ever want—position, comfort, luxury—whenever we have luxuries again?"

A growing torment was bubbling within her. "I can't listen to you, no matter how attractive you make things sound."

He took a more persuasive tack. "Suppose," he countered, "you were fully convinced that this missing sergeant would never return; that he had, actually, been killed in action? It's something you may have to face, my dear. Then would you consider me?"

Lola felt herself perilously near tears.

"I don't know," she faltered. "But, please, please, Bates, don't harp on that. I can't stand it."

"Sorry, Lola. But will you concede me this: if, in six months, there is still no word—?"

"Perhaps."

Instantly, she knew it was the wrong thing to have said. He swerved the car to the side of the road, turned off the motor. His hands seized her shoulders, turning her face toward him. Before she could wriggle away, his arms were around her, drawing her close, while his lips rained kisses on her eyes, her forehead, her cheeks, her lips. "My darling!" he breathed, over and over.

Lola said, "Bates, you're smothering me. You had no right to do that. You must take me home immediately."

They resumed their drive in silence, but the spiritual jolting she had received lingered achingly through her tired body. Barry never would have manhandled her that way, she thought; not gentle, tender Barry, whose fingers had stroked her hair as they sat in the stern of Barry's sailboat.

She and Bates said good night distantly. Later, Lola realized more than ever that it would be futile for her to make a pledge or a promise now which would be dependent on what her frame of mind might be six months hence. The stark truth dawned on her that she never could love anyone but Barry, even if it resolved itself into her remaining a spinster forever, her love locked in her heart for a man who never came back.

By the time sleep came, she had welcomed her destiny with a smile—a smile that could have meant she was dreaming of Barry's coming home.

It was a crisp day in late October.

Almost as soon as Lola arrived at the base administration building, Colonel Greenleigh buzzed for her.

"Good morning, Lola," he greeted her brusquely, his bushy iron-gray eyebrows twitching, his finger tapping a formidable looking paper before him. "Weren't you inquiring some time ago about a Beaufort boy, a Sergeant Wilmer reported missing?"

"Yes, sir, I did," she acknowledged.

"Suppose I told you he is all right?" he inquired, a twinkle in his eyes.

Lola sat bolt upright in the straight office chair. "But, colonel," she hesitated, "is he? I mean—" She suddenly saw the walls of the room swimming around her, felt her hand grasping her throat tightly; watched the odd smile on the officer's lips recede into graveness, then return.

"See for yourself," he replied, tossing the paper he held in his hand to her.

> Distinguished conduct above and beyond duty. Forced down on reconnaissance flight after his pilot had been injured. Carried wounded companion through dense jungles. Days without food. Kept pilot officer alive through heroic— Sailed small boat . . . Reaching Australia thirty-seven days later.

Lola dropped her hands, which were tightly clenched, into her lap. Her unseeing eyes gazed through the window. Her mind formed only two words, Thank God, thank God, over and over.

Outside, on the plaza, the Marine Band was crashing through the spirited Sousa march, *Semper Fidelis*. When the significance of the music dawned on her she whispered to herself, "Always faithful. I knew he would be."

Brushing away unrestrained, unashamed tears she faced Colonel Greenleigh. "Where is he now?"

"I believe on a hospital ship, en route to the states. Regulations, as you know, prevent his notifying anyone until he reaches his destination."

"And that?" Lola prompted.

"May be a Pacific coast hospital. Might even be his home."

"Home! home," she said to herself. "Oh, he's got to come home where I can take care of him."

She was silent, engrossed, for a full minute. And then, because she was only human, she said, "Colonel Greenleigh, I couldn't do a lick of work today. Not if my life depended on it."

The officer rose, placed his hand on her shoulder.

"I understand that, my dear. You're excused."

She bolted through the doorway, crashed head on into Bates Jardin.

"Look," she cried, waving the citation which she had taken from the colonel's office, "He's safe! He's alive. He's coming back."

Bates said, "That's fine." But his tone was flat, without enthusiasm.

Suddenly, Bates Jardin became very remote to Lola, a very insignificant part of her life, as if he never had existed.

But she discovered that he was not quite so easily displaced. Outwardly, he appeared indifferent to Barry's anticipated return, especially on that Saturday when he reminded her, "You've been promising me a dance for two weeks. How about tonight?"

"We'll see," she parried.

Including today, ten days already had passed since news came of Barry's survival, and in ten days, Lola calculated, he could be evacuated from the hospital ship and be homeward bound. She prayed that he would be.

If he should arrive today, through some marvelous good fortune, Lola already had arranged with Sylvia to take over the baton for their Marinettes in their appearance at the Inn. She would have to manage about Bates some way, she thought.

They had scarcely taken up their in-

struments for the night's dancing before Bates appeared at the edge of the platform, suave and smiling and assured, as usual.

"When's my turn?" he called. Lola thought quickly. "In about an hour," she replied, "after we get in the groove." In an hour, she hoped, his interest might have been diverted elsewhere, but it was not. He returned on time and Lola whispered to Sylvia, "I can't get out of it. Take over, will you?"

She found Bates' dancing perfect, as with everything else he did. They had gone around the floor once when he said, "Why do you keep staring at the door?"

Lola raised her eyes. "Was I?"

"Yes. It looked as though you expected the commandant to show up in person. Can't I hold your attention?"

"Sorry. I was just thinking."

As she continued to scan the entrance, her thoughts were arrested by the sight of an approaching figure who reminded her so much of a shrunken edition of Barry that her heart skipped a beat or two. Of course it couldn't be, she thought. This Marine, in his dazzling full dress uniform, appeared to be much older. The lines were more deeply cut in his face and his hair looked as if it had been left in the sun to bleach.

On the sleeve of the apparition—if that's what it was—she saw three gold stripes and two loops below them against a background of scarlet, the Marine Corps' insignia for gunnery sergeant.

With an inward cry of fright, Lola saw that he was advancing toward her with slow, measured steps. They were not the purposeful, assured strides of most Marines. A voice marked by its extreme huskiness asked, "Is that you, Lola?"

Her heart almost stopped completely. She realized much later that she had become rooted to the floor beside an astounded dancing partner. When she was certain, she did what she always had envisioned doing. She rushed headlong toward him with the single word, "Barry!" and found his arms waiting for her.

While her breath was still caught in her throat, she held him at arms' length, shuddering inwardly at the gauntness of his eyes, sunk into thin cheeks. His shoulders and his arms seemed to be only bones under his uniform.

"Oh, Barry!" she repeated.

Before he could answer, Lola knew that she was losing control of herself by hearing her own high-pitched, unnatural laughter, mingling with "Oh, Barry, darling, you're here. You're here."

She was vaguely aware of his stroking her shoulder, even aware of the curious glances of couples who paused to stare. And she remembered that the music stopped and that Sylvia was beside her, one arm around her waist, the other entwined in Barry's, while she urged them to a secluded corner.

Dimly she heard Bates say, "Oh, it's you, sergeant. How do you feel?" And Barry's answer, "Pretty good, sir, considering."

Then Bates' voice again. "I'm sure Miss Faircloth is happy to see you again, although it was a shock. Anything we can do—"

"Thank you, sir."

She felt her senses gradually returning; noted that Barry continued to look at her queerly, formally. He was still standing rigidly, probably for Bates' benefit.

Lola slipped her hand weakly in Barry's as Sylvia remarked, "This crowd isn't interested in reunions, I fear. They'll want music. I'll carry on while you two reunite."

Lola proposed, "Let's sit down, darling. Just let me drink you in."

Barry became a degree more rigid before he ventured, "Perhaps the lieutenant has other plans."

Bates said nothing, and it required

a second or two for her to catch the full import of his remark. Her eyes became wide and hurt.

"No, darling, no. He has no other plans as far as you and I are concerned. You're the only one that matters, dearest." She halted her tongue for fear that her voice was becoming shrill. Bates placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Now, now," he said, in an attempt to be soothing. "Don't get yourself excited again, Lola."

"But," she protested, "it's not right for you to imply things that aren't so, Bates."

She was grateful to hear Barry's voice, even though he was addressing the officer.

"Lieutenant, sir, I think I understand Lola pretty well. She's upset about everything, I guess. Would you mind if I escorted her home now?"

"Please do, darling," Lola said, not waiting for Bates' reply.

As bravely as she could, she fought against another rush of tears while Barry led her to the roadster he had borrowed from a neighbor.

Lola did not dare to speak much and apparently Barry did not care to. His conversation was in fragments, strained and forced.

"Mom told me about the band, honey. I think it's great. And you, Lola, you're looking like a million. Prettier than ever, if that's possible."

It was exactly what she wanted to hear. Most of all, though, she yearned for the strength to tell Barry that Lieutenant Jardin did not mean any more to her than the night they parted, nearly a year ago. She wanted to explain that if Barry had arrived at the Inn ten minutes earlier or later he would have found her, baton in hand, carrying out the task he had bidden her to do. Oh, how badly she wanted him to know that!

Nearing her home she managed a few words. "I can't tell you how glad I am, dearest."

He didn't lift his eyes from the dimmed-out street. "Me, too."

"How long, Barry?"

His answer, slow in coming, was cautious. "I don't know, exactly. They may kick. I may go out on a medical survey."

She gasped, "Oh, dearest, not that. Surely you're not that badly hurt."

"Maybe not."

"I know what you've been through, dear," she soothed. "It was enough to change anyone. But I haven't changed. Not one bit. I'm still yours, darling."

There was a tense uncomfortable silence before he resumed. "I was afraid you would feel that way."

"Afraid? Why?" Fright crept into her voice.

"Well, I've changed in a way. Anyhow, I'm not the same person you used to know. I'm a wreck now, sort of. My future is, well—" He shrugged. "I wouldn't blame you one bit if that lieutenant—"

Lola grasped his arm so fiercely that the car almost swerved. "Barry Wilmer," she cried, tears welling into her voice, "are you trying to hand me—over to somebody else?"

"Wouldn't it be saner?" he asked evenly, his eyes avoiding hers. "I'm a has-been now."

"No," she retorted sharply. "A Marine can't think of such things. You've got to think about finishing the job. There's nothing wrong with you that a little rest won't fix, and I'm sticking by you, no matter what."

"Let's not fuss about that tonight, honey," he requested wearily. "We'll have plenty of time to get things straightened out. But it's swell of you to feel the way you do. I'll never forget it."

"Good night, darling," she murmured, stretching out her arms to him. But his hands were busy with the switch and his eyes avoided hers.

For hours Lola tossed on her pillow,

with one steady determination flowing through her mind: I've got to make Barry see that Bates means nothing to me. I've got to get him on his feet again.

When morning came at last, Lola pulled herself by her sandal straps to Parris Island, ready to acknowledge that her world was on the verge of chaos. She busied herself at her desk, doing her best to ignore Bates Jardin who, in turn, seemed to want to ignore last night's reunion.

Hours later, or so it seemed to Lola, she was summoned to the telephone to hear her mother's frantic voice.

"It's about Barry. He collapsed from weakness. The reaction to the long trip home. They took him to the base hospital."

Lola hung up as if in a dream and dashed headlong from the office without a wrap or a word of explanation. She commandeered a ride in a passing jeep as if it were a taxi. "Oh, hurry, please," she begged the amazed corporal who drove it.

She had no difficulty in gaining admission to the base hospital. Commander Stewart, the officer in charge, escorted her to the room where Barry had been taken after a hasty examination in the emergency bay.

"I'm not certain," the medical officer declared in answer to Lola's unspoken inquiry. "He's in critical shape, though."

She closed her eyes for a prayer of thanksgiving. In Barry's room she underwent a shock at the sight of his unconscious form, his face more pale and haggard than it had been the previous night. Only his slow, labored breathing told her that he was still alive. His hand, which she gripped fiercely, was numb and cold.

Lieutenant Grosser, the attending surgeon, and a nurse were standing by. In response to Commander Stewart's question the junior officer said, "He's very weak. He needs an immediate transfusion. His tag shows he is type three."

"Umm," Commander Stewart acknowledged. "The rare type."

Lola replaced Barry's hand on the bed in a swift gentle movement and snatched at the tight sleeve of her rayon jersey dress, almost ripping the seam, until her arm was bared.

"Type three, lieutenant?" she repeated. "That's mine, too. I was at the blood bank last month." A frightened little smile was on her lips. "Get your needle."

"You mean," the younger doctor queried, "you're ready to be a blood donor again?"

She nodded her head emphatically.

"It may require a pint," he warned.

"I can give it. Please hurry."

Lola winced as the needle was jabbed into her arm. As she felt the suction draining her strength she begged her heart to give forth the richest blood it could. With each pulse beat which seemed like a jarring explosion inside her, she breathed silently, "This is for you, darling, to make you understand."

A telephone call after lunch brought word that Barry had rallied considerably. Meanwhile, word of the transfusion had gone the rounds quickly.

Bates Jardin was humble. "I owe you an apology, Lola. You're aces. When you gave your blood, that alone told me I didn't have a chance. I'm sorry for everything I've said or done."

She placed her hand over his. "You're the one who is aces, Bates. I'm glad you understand."

NEXT morning, Lola was immensely cheered to see Barry's improvement. There was a trace of color in his face. His eyes were closed and there was a wry smile on his lips.

"Is he sleeping?" Lola asked the nurse in a whisper. But at the sound of her voice his eyes opened.

"It was swell of you to come here, Lola," he said and she thought his tone

was much too formal, a stranger's voice.

Lieutenant Grosser entered. "Well, sergeant, I've been reading about what you did in the Solomons," he greeted Barry heartily. "To go through that and then collapse when you get home. Tch-tch. But the transfusion did the trick."

"Transfusion?" Barry asked, puzzled.

"Sure, and if your hair should start getting black—" He paused with an obvious glance at Lola. "Like hers, for instance, don't be surprised."

Lola felt her cheeks flush. The nurse tittered.

"Am I dreaming," Barry said. "Or what?"

"That's for you to decide," the doctor answered with an amused twinkle. "The main thing is that Miss Faircloth gave you a pint of her blood. You can thank her for being so chipper today."

Barry attempted to raise himself in bed. "You did that, Lola?"

"Of course, dear."

His white hand was extended and Lola took it in both of hers. The doctor and the nurse withdrew. Lola spoke first.

"It was nothing, darling. I'd do it again and again and again, as long as there was a drop in me."

His eyes were downcast. "You make me feel pretty small and cheap," he mumbled, "for being tempted to give up without a fight."

"A Marine never gives up," she reminded him, bending to place her lips against his.

Barry's arm went around her shoulder, drawing her closer.

"I won't give up," he whispered. "Not anything. Least of all you. I'll be in there again, but, don't cry honey. Don't worry."

"I'm not worrying, darling. I'm just too darned happy, that's all."

"You can alert the bridesmaids," Barry grinned. For answer, Lola kissed him.

KISS AND FORGET

by MURIEL EDGERTON

All that Johnny and Kit had in common when they married was the fact that both had been given the brush-off by their sweethearts. Johnny suggested to Kit that since misery loves company, why shouldn't they get married? It would be a strictly business arrangement, with Kit benefiting financially until she could get on her feet, and Johnny profiting because, married, he could not propose to the alluring Tonda. Johnny kept on carrying a torch for Tonda while he was overseas, and when he returned on leave he knew that he would have to do something about Kit. Johnny thought he had everything added up, but he forgot about love. Muriel Edgerton's dramatic story will bring tears of joy—and some sorrow—to your eyes.

In the July issue of Love Book, on sale May 19th.

Love BOOK MAGAZINE

Kisses Don't Lie

By CARMELITA BULLOCK

GEORGIA stretched tired muscles luxuriantly and yawned like a healthy young cat. Another day, another fifteen dollars. Part of that went into rent, of course, and another part into new costumes. But she was a success, she was buying war bonds, and she had only graduated from college last year.

She had time for a coke before the last session of the day. She snapped off the studio lights, lingered a little over the neon sign in the window that read GEORGIA'S DANCE STUDIO, ACROBATIC, TAP AND BALLROOM, then turned around.

Hers, all hers, and in a town that had

When a superb dancer like Tony takes a course of dancing lessons there's just one answer—he's in love with the teacher.

Tony said, "Miss Blake, use the rest of my lesson time on your date."

boomed overnight. She was a lucky girl and she ought to be happy. Only she wasn't.

Georgia's smoke-blue eyes clouded as she combed her victory-cut golden hair and applied a bright lipstick that made her white skin more dazzling.

What was it Peter Wyatt had said? "You're not only lovely, you're clever.

Your flair for exotic color, for instance."

That was the sort of compliment she was used to and it was especially nice, coming from the most popular man in town and a successful architect, to boot. This very minute he was completing the dormitories for single men at the shipyards. It was safe to kiss Peter lightly, playfully, once in a while. Because you knew he would not pull you close as Tony Girard had done last night. Peter would never kiss you until you did not quite know what you were doing and found yourself responding until the memory of it was burned into you like a flame that you could never forget.

But it's a flame I'll put out somehow, Georgia resolved, savagely, looking into the mirror. Because it's been lighted by someone who is not quite a gentleman.

Tony Girard with the hard muscles. When Georgia closed her eyes she could still feel his arms around her as they had danced, still see his handsome, gypsy-like face with kindling, dark eyes that mocked hers when she looked into them.

She thought, I'm sorry I sold him a course of ballroom lessons, but I'll have to see it through somehow.

Last night, with his kiss burning on her lips, she had been wildly confused, barely able to turn off the phonograph and demand that he leave. But tonight she was stronger—by twenty-four hours. She had had time in which to arm herself against his muscular grace in fresh blue denim and the black hair that topped his six feet two. Time in which to remind herself that he was just another shipyard worker who had come from heaven knows where, and who would be doing heaven knows what after the war. Perhaps he would become a fruit picker or—what did they call those men who worked oil wells —a roughneck?

It was not that Georgia wanted money. It was rather, to a girl who had been orphaned young and reared by strangers on money paid out of a trust fund, such things as belonging somewhere and putting down roots were terribly important. Georgia wanted to marry someone who would grow with his community. Someone like a doctor, a lawyer or—an architect.

I have impulses enough for two, Georgia thought, remembering the way she had returned Tony's kiss for the heart-rocking moment before she had torn herself away. What I need is someone with balance, like Peter, not a love pirate.

The door-chimes rang and Georgia glanced at her watch. Only a quarter of seven. If that was Tony Girard he was fifteen minutes early and she would not get her coke. That's just fine, she thought. She snapped on the main lights and walked briskly to the door. Sooner done the better. She would show him, much to his conceited surprise, that even as he held her in his arms she could be utterly casual and indifferent. That would teach him better than any words.

But the sight of him unnerved her. He filled the doorway, big and vital, and burst into the room. "Am I early, Pavlova?" he grinned.

Suddenly Georgia knew what she must do. Cancel his course. She simply could not see it through. Not when just the sight of him made her heart pound in this crazy way.

"Come in." She tried to keep her voice lightly indifferent. "I have something to tell you."

"Maybe I know what it is." He lounged easily against her exercise bar, his eyes teasing and intimate. His manner infuriated Georgia. He was the casual one while she felt herself struggling for poise.

"I doubt it, Mr. Girard."

"Mister? After last night? Come off it, Georgia." Tony shifted his weight lazily, holding her eyes with his own.

Georgia glanced back with exaggerated

sweetness. But she fought to control her breathing. "I realize I've been guilty of letting you kiss me. It's beyond me how it happened. But it won't happen again."

"Are you sure, darling?"

"Quite, thank you. And now, since I can't depend on your not forgetting yourself again—" Georgia paused, feeling very much the victor as she prepared to deliver her final blow, "I'm cancelling your course."

Her straight little nose went up in the air as she turned toward the cash drawer. But the razor edge of anger under Tony's words stopped her. "Let's get one thing straight. I didn't forget myself. You invited me."

"Why I did no such—how dare you—" began Georgia but Tony cut in.

"I didn't receive an engraved invitation, 'Miss Georgia Blake teaches a mean rhumba and a kiss thrown in with every lesson,' but that wasn't necessary. A girl has other ways of letting you know how she feels."

Tony gave a little snort of contempt at Georgia's helpless silence. He continued, biting off each word, not sparing her though she winced before him. "Yes, you invited me. With every move of your body, every expression of your eyes. But when I gave you what you were begging for you pretended you were insulted."

Tony let his eyes flick over Georgia's costume. She shrank, knowing she had chosen the jungle print to emphasize every bit of the allure with which nature had endowed her. She hoped he could not see the beat of her heart through the dress.

His eyes were bitter. "You didn't act like such a modest violet before. But instead of worship from a safe distance you got kissed! I was a mean, nasty man calling your bluff. Well, sis, sorry not to oblige, but to me you're just a girl who wants love and is ashamed to admit it."

Georgia's eyes, purpled with emotion, pleaded with him to stop. She wished she had never set eyes on this dark stranger who lashed her with his words, probed at things within her that she did not understand herself. Yet a part of her stood to one side and saw how wonderful he looked with his strong, tanned neck thrusting up like a column from the fresh blue work shirt, the dark eyes and black curly hair.

Tony broke the momentary spell. "You're a snob, Georgia. Some day, when it's too late, when you long for the love you haven't found, you'll remember you could have had it. If you hadn't been a coward. Afraid of taking love when it came because you found it in a common working man."

Georgia's eyes blazed. "You've gone too far. I could never love you." She jerked open the cash drawer with hands that shook. "Here's your money—all of it."

But Tony was beside her swiftly, closing the drawer and taking her in his arms in a single motion. "I paid for my course and I'm having it." His voice was like half-cooled steel. Steel that might flame again. Georgia went limp for a moment, then anger flared. "I hate you!"

She jerked away but Tony held her with his eyes. "That has nothing to do with my lesson. Play some music, please."

Georgia stiffened with resentment. If he insisted on holding her to their bargain there was nothing she could do.

"There'll be no repetition of last night."

"None. If that's what you want."

She moved toward the phonograph. She thought, Go on, Tony Girard, make me hate you more every minute. Because that's exactly what I want to do. That's the only thing that will make me forget your kiss, the only thing strong enough to prevent my letting you kiss me again.

She selected a record and set the needle. Stiffly she entered Tony's arms and they started to dance. But his amazing strength

and rhythm penetrated that stiffness, melting it completely.

"You don't need dancing lessons." The words slipped out unbidden. Heavens, what was she saying? He was sure to misunderstand. She glanced at Tony and saw that his eyes were filled with mocking laughter. She dropped her arms in panic just as the door chimes rang. There never had been a sweeter sound. Georgia murmured "Excuse me," and almost ran to open the door. Relief flooded through her at the sight of Peter Wyatt.

Peter swept off his expensive hat. "Hello, Georgia. Haven't forgotten our supper date have you?" His blue eyes narrowed. What's the matter? You look a little pale."

Then he saw Tony and Georgia thought his face went blank suddenly. As for Tony, he stood, legs planted apart, utterly still. The air seemed charged, somehow, and Georgia hastened to introduce them.

"Mr. Girard, Mr. Wyatt. I'm just finishing Mr. Girard's lesson, Peter."

Tony's voice cut in. "The lesson is finished. I'll be a big-hearted client, Miss Blake. You may use the rest of my time on your date." He moved toward the door with easy, panther-like grace. As he turned, he caught Peter's eye and Georgia saw something naked and savage flash between them. Peter's eyes dropped first. Tony's flicked to Georgia briefly. "So long, teacher. You win."

Georgia raised questioning brows.

"About the course," he said. "I guess I don't need dancing lessons after all."

He started to turn. Georgia touched his arm. "But your refund—"

"Skip it."

Georgia flushed. She did not want to be obligated to Tony Girard for a thing. "If you won't wait now, where may I send a check?"

Tony paused. His glance softened strangely and Georgia felt something indefinable in it, something that might almost be pity. She did not understand the change but her heart pounded with furious resentment and she bit her lip to keep from flinging a last retort that would make her seem ill-mannered.

"I'm living at the dormitories your boy friend built."

The door closed like a rifle's crack. Tony was gone.

Georgia turned to Peter with a smile. But it was a bright, blind smile that held no gladness.

"He must know who you are." She laughed.

Peter did not answer. "Come on, Georgia. If you're through, let's do the town. I got my first check on the dorms today and you and I are celebrating."

"Celebrating." Georgia murmured the word, then flung back her head until every golden strand shimmered. "Let's, Peter." What she did not say was that she wanted to celebrate her riddance of Tony, but that was what she was thinking.

She handed her sheared beaver jacket to Peter, snuggled into it and adjusted her flaring felt hat, the color of tangerines.

Peter slipped his arm through hers and squeezed it. "That's the way I like my girls," he said. "There's something electric about you tonight, Georgia."

But Georgia knew her gayety was sham. What was wrong with her anyway? She had planned this campaign so carefully. For weeks she had handled Peter with gay artfulness, led him along expertly with one objective, getting him to the precise point of ardor he now was exhibiting. She should be elated, but something kept getting between her and elation. It was anger she guessed. Anger at Tony to have burst into her life and spoiled this triumph for her. How dare he cling to her thoughts when she should have nothing on her mind but Peter! Well, she could recapture things as they had been. It would take a little time but

she knew the old feeling she had for Peter would flood back. After all, he was everything she wanted.

Georgia smiled into Peter's keen blue eyes. They were gay, they did not suck you in and drown you like Tony's. She noted with approval the well-bred scent that was characteristic of him, a combination of good shaving lotion, Russian cigarettes and tweeds that smelled of peat smoke.

"I'm ready darling," she said. It was the first time Georgia had used the endearment and she could see that it pleased him.

THEY dined at The Rendezvous and Georgia loved the sense of being taken care of that Peter always gave her. He ordered devilled crab brought in a chafing dish because Georgia had said this was one of her meatless days on account of the war effort. It bubbled appetizingly over the tiny blue flame and with it was a bottle of fine sauterne and a crisp green salad.

The setting was perfect. There were candles on the table, well-groomed people all about them. Georgia sank back in the cushioned booth that overlooked the dance floor.

"Happy?"

Peter leaned across the table, lighted her cigarette. Their eyes held over the flare of the match.

"Yes." Georgia wondered why she had hesitated. Everything was perfect, was it not? Several girls had cast envious glances her way, lingering upon Peter's tall fairness, his manner of authority with waiters. Georgia felt in her bones he would propose tonight. She was filled with well-being after the excellent dinner, pleasantly relaxed. Yet, in spite of those things, she had the queerest feeling of letdown, of being deposited on a quiet beach after fighting mile high breakers.

Peter moved to her side of the booth. Always casual, his arm encircled her waist lightly, but there was a new urgency in his touch. His other hand played with her fingers. "Do you think we go together, Georgia?"

Georgia waited for something swift and winged to fly out of her heart to Peter. But nothing happened. He flashed his crooked grin encouragingly, but his eyes were serious. Georgia knew he was waiting intently for her answer.

"I—"

Just then the band began "Muskrat Ramble." Georgia knew Peter hated fast music but she could not seem to help herself. "Let's dance, Peter."

His arm around her froze. Then he crushed out his cigarette and rose, his face a polite mask.

"If you wish."

They moved toward the dance floor and Georgia started jigging before they reached it. She could always think better while she danced. Her faultless rhythm, one with the music, released something within her. But her steps missed a beat and she frowned. Tonight, it seemed, she could not be sure of anything.

The dance ended in a sax run and Georgia wished that she, too, could soar up and away, not face the issue that stood waiting to be decided, between them. But the question stood in his eyes as he faced her.

"Peter," she said helplessly, "Let's go for a drive."

"Okay." Abruptly he escorted her off the dance floor, slipped the soft brown fur over her shoulders. Georgia noticed admiring glances following them as they went out. They did look well together. Moved with sudden regret at the tailspin she had made of Peter's high mood, she slipped her hand into his. A light came into his blue eyes but it was a light tempered with reserve. She knew then that Peter was not going to lead with his chin a second time. Not until he knew ex-

actly how she felt about him. Exactly.

"I started this," Georgia thought. "Now I wish I knew what to do next."

GEORGIA'S hair blew softly in the night air. She laughed, about nothing. Chatted about nothing, very fast. But Peter would not respond or be deterred from his purpose. The low roadster purred away from the curb. He handled the instruments deftly and Georgia saw again with a pang how attractive he was. Then he interrupted her stream of chatter. "What happened to the sparks tonight, Georgia?"

"Nothing, Peter." When she saw that she could not dodge the issue, that he was looking at her steadily. "I may have been a little absent-minded. I was thinking."

They were headed for the criss-cross of quiet lanes that edged the town.

"About that big ape you introduced me to?"

"Yes." Suddenly Georgia wanted to explain to Peter why their evening had done a fade-out. She should have talked it out of her system with him at the start. "I'm sorry, Peter, that I lost my sparks. But Tony Girard upset me."

"What happened, Georgia?" The car was travelling slowly now.

She came alive at the question. More than she had been all evening. She would clear the air once and for all of Tony Girard. "He made me angry, Peter, clear through. It was about the course. I wanted to cancel it but he refused a refund. He made me give him his lesson. Oh, Peter, that's why I was so glad to see you."

Peter had taken her hand in his. Now he released it. "Then it wasn't I you were glad to see. I was an interruption, a respite from a difficult client. Anyone would have sufficed—the milkman, your grandmother, anyone."

Georgia's eyes were lakes of ice. "Aren't you being difficult?"

For answer, Peter twisted the car up a quiet road and shut off the ignition. Dance music throbbed over the radio and he turned it low. "Bring on the crepe. I start out in a high mood with my favorite girl and look what happens. She spends her time thinking about an impossible person called Tony Girard. Make up your mind, Georgia. Do you want to play or don't you?"

Georgia found herself melting suddenly. Peter had a perfect right to be annoyed. She had ruined his evening so far. But she would make it up. Perhaps he would even ask her again how she felt about him and this time she knew what she would say. She turned on her most appealing glance and he flashed his old grin. "Georgia—"

Peter's arms went around her and Georgia closed her eyes. Peter had simply brushed her lips before, he never really had kissed her. They had played at love and Peter had bided his time until he could be sure of her response. Well, he need not wonder any more. Georgia waited, ready to surrender to his kiss. But the radio flared abruptly. An urgent voice cut the music.

"Calling all cars, calling all cars." The music clicked off. "Building collapsed . . . building collapsed . . . men's dormitories near shipyards . . . men's dormitories near shipyards. . . ."

Peter thrust her away and snapped off the radio. "Damn that Morgan. He told me they'd hold together till after the war!"

Tony's image flashed through her mind. Dark eyes that could be lazy or savage. Black curls that topped his six feet two. He was in those dormitories. Now. Then Peter's words penetrated Georgia's consciousness, like spear thrusts that ripped away a veil.

"You're not responsible for this, Peter. Are you? *Are you?*"

For answer he started the car and her

blood warmed with the relief she felt.

"Oh, drive fast, Peter. It was a mistake. You can explain—"

But the face turned to Georgia was unfamiliar, twisted with fury. "They'll never get me. It was no mistake. Sure, we put the cheapest stuff in the foundations. They were supposed to hold together till after the war. They were good enough for common workmen, anyway!"

Common workmen. Why, that's what Tony had called himself. A common working man. Tony, in those crumbling barracks. Georgia clutched Peter's arm. Even though she hated Tony she had to know if he was all right.

"You've got to face the music, Peter. I hope no one's hurt. I hope Tony—"

Peter grabbed her wrists, twisting them sharply, and Georgia cried in pain. "Tony again! Get this straight! He and I tangled in a deal. I put him out of business. He'll never come back. But you wouldn't be around to see it anyway!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm blowing, and so are you. If I let you go you'll talk!"

Peter turned the car up a brush-grown trail.

"Where are you taking me?"

Peter kept his eyes on the trail. The car lurched along at a terrific speed and he spoke jerkily, out of the side of his mouth. "To the hills, my pet. It's going to be very interesting, hiding out with you. Afterward you may not want to tell the town what happened."

"You wouldn't dare," breathed Georgia. What a fool she had been. Her mind felt like a picture puzzle that was becoming blazingly clear. It was too late now, for a lot of things, but she was thinking with desperate logic while she gripped the seat to steady her wild jouncing. She could never match Peter's madman strength, but she did have a dancer's agility. Suddenly Georgia's chest rose and fell sharply. She knew what she would have to do.

Peter must cross the highway to get out of town. Georgia closed her eyes and prayed there would be lots of cars on the highway, racing to the collapsed dormitories.

"One move out of you and you'll wish you hadn't." Peter waited his chance, then gave the big car the gun. It shot across the road.

Georgia held her breath. It was almost over! She seized the wheel and gave it a twist. Every bit of strength she had went into that quick, desperate movement. There was a flash of lights, a grinding screech of brakes, and a crash that blotted out everything.

GEORGIA seemed to be swimming under water. With a tremendous effort she struggled to the surface and opened her eyes. But instead of water

there was a little white room, a bowl of gardenias beside her bed and Tony.

Her mouth formed words, "Are you all right? Oh I'm so glad—I'm so sorry."

"Make up your mind, young lady," said a voice with a chuckle. For the first time, Georgia noticed the white-coated doctor.

Tony scowled and gestured to silence the doctor. Georgia saw, then, that Tony's hand was swathed in bandages.

"We had a houseful here after the accident. Tony did rescue work to the last man. He had already let his hand go, almost too long. But when they brought you in, he insisted on forfeiting his turn." He smiled and left.

Georgia stared at Tony, while a slow, sweet wonder crept along her veins. "You did that after the way I acted?"

Tony's voice was carefully casual. "It was nothing personal. I'd have done it for any girl."

Georgia's eyes had grown enormous in her white face. "I didn't know." Suddenly she knew what she wanted to say. "That I loved you." Then, incredibly, she was saying it. "That I loved you, Tony."

With a sob, Georgia turned her head on the pillow. This was the rest of the picture puzzle but she had known the answer too late. Too late she had discovered that what she thought was hate was love she had refused to admit. If he would only go!

But instead of footfalls receding and the closing of a door, Tony moved quickly to her side. Her eyes opened to see his face adoring her, for the instant before his lips came down on hers.

Shakily they drew apart, "Peter?"

"He's locked up and they're investigating him—plenty! If it weren't for the chance you took—"

"How did you know?"

"Wyatt spilled the works. You're in all the papers, a heroine."

"I am!"

Georgia flushed under Tony's glowing eyes. "I can't take credit for being noble. I just wanted to be with you."

He started to kiss her again, but there was a tap on the door. It was a nurse.

"How soon can Miss Blake go places with a Lieutenant in the Army Engineer Corps?" he asked the woman.

"Day after tomorrow, the doctor says." The nurse smiled and withdrew.

"Then you are—?"

"An architect, too. Good or bad, you can't seem to avoid them, darling. The Army had my commission on ice, waiting for the Architect Association's okay. They reinstated me today, when I was able to prove that Wyatt had framed me."

"Tony, that's wonderful." Georgia's eyes were shining. "But please remember I loved you when I thought you were just a 'common working man.' "

Tony chuckled, then sobered. "Georgia, darling, I wanted you to love me the first time I saw you. Why do you think I bought those rhumba lessons? No harm in hurrying it along, I thought. But when I saw how men had spoiled you, I decided to make you forget your phony standards —make you admit that kisses don't lie." Tony grinned. "You were trouble, darling, plenty! But maybe that's what I liked. I've done some bronco-busting in my time."

"Is that where you got those?" Shyly, Georgia touched his muscular arm.

"Yep, partly. Do you mind that I've been all sorts of things? Cowboy, a stevedore? But I did get to school."

Georgia settled back into his arms. "I wouldn't want a thing changed."

But Tony was murmuring into her fragrant hair. "Are you sure you don't want me to add one to my list?"

"It depends, Tony, on what it is."

"Don't you know?" His lips were very close. "I want to be married right away to the girl I love."

There was only one answer to that.

By
R. H.
Grenville

Plaint

I don't mind wearing last year's dress,
Retouching last year's hat;
I'm really quite adaptable
To things like that.

But what I've found the hardest thing
Of all of these to do,
Is kiss your photograph goodnight
Instead of you!

The Sixty-four

By LAURA LOUDON

Kelley started asking Lee the dollar questions, but when stakes were hearts Lee insisted it was her turn.

LEE smiled coaxingly at the gateman, and went with Richard all the way down the train shed beside the tracks and into his coach, watching him stow his bags and neatly arrange his brief case and the new magazines she had brought him on the opposite seat. Richard looked more darkly handsome and more distinguished than ever in his new medical uniform, but he was not at his brightest and best so early in the morning.

"Better run along, honey," he said with that flicker at the corner of his mouth and the quirk to his black brows which always meant suppressed annoyance and told Lee he rather wished she had not come to see him off. "These trains don't give much warning before they start."

For just an instant she let her arms cling, reaching up to encircle his neck. Richard was all she had, and life was going to be a pretty barren thing without him.

But Richard did not like public demonstrations. His lips brushed hers briefly, but his hands disengaged hers. "Try to find a taxi so you won't be late to the office," he advised, not unkindly. "I'll write as soon as I get settled at the post. I'll be looking for a house so I can send for you soon. Good-by, darling."

Somehow, Lee found herself outside on the platform, staring through the window at Richard, already picking up a magazine. Sometimes Lee wished that the man she was going to marry would take time out for just a little more sentiment, although she always guiltily repressed the thought as disloyal to Richard, who of course owed his first devotion to his profession.

He did look out then, waving and smiling, and she swallowed determinedly and blinked back the tears because Richard had been stern about that. "I don't want you at the station if you're going to cry, Lee. I can't endure moist leave-takings. Anyway, it's only for a little while."

She stood quietly, out of the way of the milling crowds, her wide violet eyes with their dark smudges of lashes drinking in what she could see of Richard's face, one small ungloved hand rubbing absently at her left cheek where the cadeucus on Richard's collar had scratched it, just above the dimple.

Everyone in the whole world except herself, it seemed, was going away, crowding up the train steps and pouring through the coaches in search of seats. And then, long before Lee had steeled herself to its departure, the train was moving, gliding smoothly, but gaining momentum every minute.

"Oh—!" she gasped, and took several quick, running steps beside it, almost as if she could in that way keep alongside of Richard all the way to Las Vegas.

He waved again, and motioned her back so firmly that she stopped, accustomed to doing Richard's bidding, and then the train was only a diminishing black rectangle of rear platform, moving out along

Dollar Question

Lee thought, When Kelley kisses me he pretends I'm Diana.

the tracks, its red light a vague warning which she could feel but not explain.

For a long moment Lee stood alone beside the empty space the train had left, very small in the blue wool suit which exactly matched her deep blue eyes, her saucy hat which was only a bunch of pansies and a bow of sapphire velvet looking out of place above her white, woebegone heart-shaped face.

Then, blindly, she turned and started toward the exit, her eyes unseeing. She collided sharply with an obstacle which seemed to rise up in her path.

The obstacle reached a khaki-covered arm to steady her. "Easy does it, sister," he advised in a slow western drawl. "A great big girl like you has to consider women and children in the rush for life boats."

Lee started and stared miles up, it seemed, at smiling, deep-set gray eyes beneath an army cap, at a wide generous mouth, parted to show teeth whose whiteness was emphasized by the small dark brush of mustache on his upper lip.

It was all so unexpected that she almost smiled, too, before she remembered what Richard would think of that. "Excuse me," she gasped, and hurried on, head down, because recalling Richard reminded her that he had gone, and it might be months before she would see him again. The thought made her a little dizzy.

She did not even know she had stumbled until the hand on her elbow righted her, and there was the soldier, a sergeant, her brief glance told her, still at her side.

"Now listen," he told her severely, "I know it's hard to see them go, but banging yourself around this way isn't going to help your young doctor a bit. Have you had any breakfast?"

She hadn't, for fear of missing Richard. But that was no business of this stranger who must have been spying on their leave-taking or he would not know Richard was a doctor.

"I had plenty, thanks." Lee told the sergeant stiffly. "And you don't have to hold on to me. I'm quite all right."

He did not relinquish his grip, just went on talking in a soothing tone. "Of course you are, or will be in a minute. These things take time." His voice dropped to a mournful note. "I know just how you feel. You see I just put my best girl on that train, too."

"You did?" Involuntarily Lee's steps slowed. "I'm sorry. Has she gone for a long time, too?"

He nodded sadly. "For the duration, I guess. She couldn't go where I'm going, and the city doesn't agree with her anyway. It seemed best to get the break over at once."

Lee couldn't help being sorry for a man whose girl would leave him for any reason whatever, before it was strictly necessary. "I'd think she'd have wanted to stay near you as long as she could," she suggested gently. "If she cares for you, that is."

"Oh, she cares," he boasted proudly. "I'm the only man in the world, for her." They had reached the station rotunda, and this time it was his step that slowed. "Look here," he coaxed wistfully, "there isn't a soul I can talk to about her. Wouldn't you have breakfast with me so I can tell you about her, even if you're not hungry?"

Even Richard could not disapprove of this, Lee thought, refusing to remember his parting admonition about being on time at the office. Two people, each of whom had just said good-by to their heart's desire, consoling each other for a brief moment before they went their separate ways. The sizzling wheat cakes and coffee tasted awfully good, when you hadn't eaten since the night before.

Twisted sideways on his stool before the high counter, her companion seemed to pay more attention to her needs than his own, which made her feel very protected and cared for. It had always been

the other way around with her and Richard, she realized, and experienced a feeling of guilt at the thought. Richard was solid, and it was natural and right for a doctor to be absorbed first of all in his profession. This boy beside her probably had time to devote to girls. He was just a personality kid, playing at being a soldier, probably.

"You'd better eat your own breakfast," she told the sergeant primly. "And if you want to tell me about your girl you'll have to hurry. I mustn't be late at the office."

"My girl?" For a minute his thoughts seemed far away, and Lee wondered how a girl would feel, to have her man's eyes dreaming over her with that ecstatic expression. Again she experienced the flash of indignation at the girl who would leave him a moment before she was forced to do so.

"Oh, Diana's a lovely thing," the sergeant said then, softly. "Slim, with hair the color of a ripe horsechestnut and the loveliest brown eyes in the world."

"She's tall?" Lee asked, feeling inexplicably dissatisfied with her own five-feet-three and blond coloring.

The sergeant remembered her existence, smiling. "As high as my heart," he informed her. "That's the height every girl ought to be."

It was a sweet thought. But am I as high as Richard's heart? Lee wondered. Sometimes she seemed to fall so far short of the things he expected. He would teach her, of course, once they were together all the time, and she would learn gladly, because she had loved Richard so long, ever since the days back home when he had been the big boy next door. But it would be nice to know that he thought her perfect, just as she was, instead of becoming impatient with her impulsiveness or her habit of making stories out of the places they went and the people they saw, her preference for simple clothes, and movies instead of night clubs.

"I think your girl is pretty lucky," she told the sergeant.

"Oh, come now," he laughed. "You can't sell me that idea after the kiss I just watched through the train window; you think your soldier is special, too. But Diana thinks she's lucky, and I'm going to miss her terribly. Look, the coffee's put the pink back in your cheeks, and I suppose you've got to run. But couldn't we meet tonight so I could tell you some more? We'll both feel sort of lost this first night, and dining together might help. I'm Kelley Jones, technical sergeant from Dubuque, on temporary duty here. Kelley, to you. I could even get my C. O. to vouch for me if necessary."

Kelley Jones was not as distinguished a name as Richard Marlowe, but the man himself did not need vouching for, Lee thought, he was so honest and friendly and ingenuous. Just like a home town boy, only nicer than any she had known. Except Richard, of course.

And this first evening would be lonely. Ever since she had come here after Aunt Marcia's death to take the job in the airport office in order to be near Richard while he was interning, there had always been the possibility, at each day's end, that the evening could be spent with him. Sometimes he could not make it, but Lee understood that. She was used to Richard, after all their years of going together, and knew how to be patient. Richard had wanted her to come to New York, and had liked having her where he could find her in his leisure hours, even if he was not very demonstrative. Lee did not mind even that too much. Love was usually like that, she told herself. One person always gave more than the other, and she was content to be the one.

But Richard was possessive, so she had made almost no friends in the whole city.

She smiled at Sergeant Kelley Jones. "All right, just this once. But I have to be home early."

THE place he took her was quiet, almost homey. On the rare occasions when Richard took her out they always went to bright, gay places where they could watch the town's important people. "If we're only going to a dump, we might as well stay home," he always said.

Richard might call this small place on a side street a dump, but Lee liked it. She told Kelley so, between sips of the sweet dry wine the waiter brought with their dinner.

Kelley beamed. "I wanted you to like it, because it's such a good place to talk."

However he did not begin at once, but sat quietly, his deep eyes studying her face.

"You were going to tell more about your girl," Lee prompted, watching his lean, powerful hand which seemed as if it might snap the fragile stem of his wine glass. "You say her name is Diana?"

"Oh, of course." He snapped back to attention and grinned sheepishly. "I'm so contented that I forgot we were talking. "Yes, it's Diana. Pretty, don't you think?"

"Very pretty." But Lee did not feel especially drawn to this Diana who was tall and auburn-haired, and lovely to look at, since she could inspire such adoration in the eyes of the man who loved her. Some girls seemed to have everything. "What does she like to do?" Lee asked politely.

Kelley leaned back and blew a careful smoke ring, squinting at her whimsically. "She likes out of door things best. Hiking, hunting, that sort of thing. But she's a home girl too. We've spent loads of evenings just sitting by the fire. Although she enjoys parties, too. Diana's a friendly soul."

"Doesn't she like to dance?" Lee asked. This girl was beginning to sound almost too perfect.

The gray eyes across the table were regretful. "Well, no, Lee, she doesn't. That's one of the few things I miss in her. Diana just doesn't dance." He smiled.

Did he mean that she couldn't? Was his Diana in some way a cripple? But no, he had mentioned hiking. She wouldn't, then, and that was cruel, to deny this attractive, fun-loving young sergeant a thing he enjoyed, when soon he would be far away from dancing, perhaps for a long time. Lee added this new indignation to the dislike she already felt for the absent Diana.

"I'm a fool for it, myself," Kelley confessed. "Lee, if I start the juke box, you'll dance with me, won't you?"

He danced like a dream, she discovered. It was a strange sensation to be in any arms but Richard's, but after all, everyone danced. Even Richard, probably miles deep in his medical journals as the train sped westward, could not think she was doing anything wrong, just dancing with this nice soldier whose girl had so heartlessly deserted him. Why, it was just the same as if this were the U.S.O., and Lee one of the hostesses.

Nevertheless she did try to pretend, now and then, that this was Richard, holding her. But each time Kelley would murmur some laughing bit of nonsense, so different from anything Richard would be likely to say, that she gave it up and closed her eyes, following Kelley's steps and giving herself up to the music.

Back at the table he grinned at her, ordering more wine. "I like you with your cheeks pink," he said in his slow drawl. "And I suppose you know there's stardust in your eyes."

Lee's cheeks became even more pink. It did not seem just the way for a man in love to talk to a girl who was engaged to another man. "I've got to be going," she said hastily.

"Please, not just yet, with more wine coming. And we haven't played all the tunes." But his tone was once more light and impersonal, and Lee relaxed. Probably all soldiers had a line, and all that about stardust was his.

It was late when they finally went out under the real stars, and Lee by that time found it hard to believe she hadn't known Kelley all her life. In fact, in some ways she knew him better than she ever had known Richard, in spite of their years lived next door. Knew what he thought and felt, and what he had been like as a little boy, and what he planned to do when the war was over. Knew even his dreams.

They were nice dreams, Lee thought. The dreams of a young, almost shy heart, in a big, powerful man's body. She wondered if he ever had talked to Diana about his dreams, but of course he had. Lee only hoped Diana was good enough for him.

They took a bus downtown, and at the steps of her apartment house Kelley paused, so expectantly that she knew he hoped to be asked in. But that was something Richard definitely wouldn't approve of. Indeed he very seldom came in himself. "Even in the city, Lee, you have to think of the neighbors," he had told her.

She held out her hand to Kelley Jones. "I had a very nice time," she told Kelley Jones, "and I'll be wishing you luck, you and Diana." Now if he just would not try to kiss her good night, and spoil everything.

He did not. "You were very sweet to come," he told her gravely, and for an instant he lifted the small hand he held to lay it against his cheek. "Good night, Lee," he said, and in another second was swinging off down the street.

Lee watched him all the way to the corner, but he did not look back. She went slowly upstairs, stopping once to look curiously at the hand which had rested against Kelley's cheek. It was ridiculous to have this cheated feeling as if there were unfinished business left hanging in mid-air. They had spent a pleasant evening together, comforted each other during their first few hours alone, and now it was over and done with. By making no suggestion about seeing her again, Kelley had shown that he realized that, too.

In her room, she moved Richard's picture into an even more prominent position. "Good night, darling," she told it. But Richard, by now well on his way to his new field of endeavor, seemed strangely nebulous and beyond the reach of her thoughts. Forlornly, Lee went to bed.

THE telephone was ringing when she came in next afternoon, warm and tired from the long trip in from the airport. Perhaps a wire had come from Richard. She answered rather breathlessly.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," a familiar voice said from the other end of the wire. "This is the Deserted Lovers' Corporation calling, to ask if you care to try answering our regulation two dollar question. Two whole, bright, new dollars, ma'am, if you know the correct answer."

"What?" Lee gasped, clinging for dear life to the receiver. "What did you say?"

"Fine," the voice resumed with enthusiasm. "That's simply fine, and we thank you for your cooperation. And if you're quite ready, we'll go ahead. The question, ma'am, is what time do I call for you tonight, and please take plenty of time to think it out. Remember how much depends on your answer."

Of all the nonsense! Lee's cheeks were as bright as the cherries on her new navy straw hat, and the dimple in her left cheek deepened. "What are you talking about?" she demanded. "We had our date."

"Now, ma'am!" The voice sounded reproachful. "Don't say you're all over feeling any need for consolation. I can't believe you'd forget your dear departed so easily. Me, I'll probably go out and drown myself from sheer loneliness, unless something happens to take my mind off Diana."

It was the most absurd kind of nonsense, of course, but it was fun, and Lee had not had much nonsense in her life recently. "I

wouldn't want you to drown yourself," she murmured and added hastily, "and I am missing Richard terribly. It's pretty awful without him."

The voice brightened. "Our best congratulations on knowing the correct answer, ma'am. You may expect our messenger almost immediately."

Idiot, Lee giggled, hanging up. But she hurried, showering and slipping into the cool blue sheer which went so well with the new hat, running a comb through her curls so that they stood out in a pale gold aureole around her face and painting her mouth to match her crimson velvet sash and the cherries on her hat.

Kelley was there almost before she had finished, and his eyes were frankly admiring. "That doctor of yours must be a man with strength of character to have been able to leave you behind," he told her as they turned southward into the Village.

The place they found was out of doors and their table for two stood underneath a plane tree whose branches wove a moving pattern of shadows on the checkered cloth and across Kelley's face. "Please admit you're glad you had the answer to the question," he begged, smiling, but with a strange urgency in his tone.

Lee returned his look seriously. "I thought our reason for meeting was to discuss Diana," she suggested, wishing he were not so terribly attractive and that he would not watch her so intently.

"Oh, it is." Kelley's manner was once more light and gay. "But Diana would be glad, too, that you answered correctly. She isn't jealous, and besides, your love for Richard makes you the safest kind of companion."

That was true, of course. Because she did love Richard. At least—

"Let's dance," Lee said hurriedly. Dancing, she did not have to listen to his oddly electric voice, talking about the virtues of his paragon.

THE next day was Sunday, and this time Kelley called it the ten dollar question. Lee knew she ought to refuse to talk to him at all, but there had not been even a postcard from Richard. She did not really expect a letter until he arrived in Nevada, but surely he might have found time for a card along the way. Besides, the day had been hot and her apartment was stuffy. Kelley's idea of a picnic somewhere across the George Washington Bridge was too appealing to be turned down.

"But this must be the last time," she told him sternly, as he turned the small car he had borrowed from a buddy away from the concrete highway, heading for the cool shadows of the New Jersey hills. "Even if your Diana isn't the jealous type she might not like to have one person monopolizing all your time. And Richard wouldn't like it either," she added virtuously, "even though he knows I never think of any other man but him."

"But if he knows that," Kelley argued, "then he'll also know that you can think just as well in New Jersey as in New York. Ask him, when you write tonight. Or have you, already?"

Certainly Lee was not going to admit that she could not write to Richard until he let her know where to send a letter. No doubt Kelley heard from Diana by every mail. He would not understand that Richard had more on his mind than Diana did. "Maybe I will," she said evasively.

They found a lovely spot on a hill, overlooking the roofs of a small town far below. A brook ran tumbling down across the rocky pasture and already in the west a slim crescent moon hung pale against the afterglow.

Kelley brought a blanket from the car and settled Lee cozily before he went about the business of building a fire and hanging bacon above it on long green twigs. The bacon sputtered and gave off a tantalizing fragrance, and the rolls Kel-

ley toasted on the coals were exactly right. Kelley knew what to do on a picnic, probably from watching that outdoor wonder, Diana, Lee thought.

When supper was over and cleared away, he sat down on the blanket at her side, his narrowed eyes staring up into the deep blue zenith where stars were appearing, one by one. "If only such times could last," he murmured in a low, almost drowsy tone. "If we never had to go back, Lee."

"Not even to Diana?" Lee asked crisply. This was becoming a little tough to take, this playing understudy to another girl, knowing always, no matter how intimately they talked or laughed together, that Kelley's heart was with his absent lady, and that he was only weaving Lee into the picture in her place. Not that Lee wanted a place of her own in Kelley's picture, of course. Richard was her picture. But it would be better not to go on seeing this gray-eyed young giant with the oddly disquieting overtones in his voice.

Kelley was watching her. "The perfect thing would be if Diana could come to us here," he said softly. "I want to introduce you to Diana, Lee. I know you would love each other."

Possible, but scarcely probable, Lee thought a trifle grimly. And certainly the last thing she ever intended to let herself in for was being third at a party with Kelley Jones and his girl.

She snapped back to the present then, with a sensation that something amazing was happening. Only a strong hand, reaching out to clasp hers, but why should it do such things to her pulses, send the blood singing through her veins, and cause her heart to hammer as Richard's hand never had done?

She stirred uneasily and tried to pull away her hand, but the larger one held it fast. And then Kelley's arm was around her shoulders, and she was being drawn close until her flushed face was very near his. His eyes were tender, worshipful.

"Lee," his deep voice murmured huskily. "Lee, you lovely—" It was almost as if his voice broke, and then his mouth was on hers, warm and sweet and demanding, shaking her senses so that even while all her instincts cried out in warning, her lips curved, shaping themselves to his, and in all the world there was only the blinding, dizzy sweetness of that kiss. This was what the universe was made for, the stars, and all the different moons, even the soft, fragrant earth on which they sat. God had created them all for this moment, for Kelley's mouth on hers, his arms, holding her close.

She must be crazy, thinking such a thing. Because Kelley belonged to Diana, loved her with his whole heart and soul. He had said so often enough. And Lee, of course, belonged to Richard.

She jerked away and sprang to her feet. "Kelley!" she blazed. "I suppose you think you're funny, doing that and all the while pretending that it's somebody else you're kissing. You'd better go back to your army, Sergeant Jones, or to your own girl. Because I'm through. I hate you and I only wish I'd never seen you, do you hear?"

He came erect with the lithe spring of a tiger. "No you don't, Lee," he said gently, towering above her in the dark so that his head blotted out a myriad of stars. "You don't hate me. Not really. But I'm sorry, dear, truly. I swear I didn't mean to do it. At least, well, I swore I'd never frighten you. Come, I'll take you home if that's what you want. Don't shake so, honey, please. You're so little, and I can't bear being the one to hurt you."

But how could you help shaking, Lee wondered, when everything you believed in had been turned topsy-turvy, when you yourself had failed in loyalty to your man, and when the person who had been the cause of all the damage spoke to you with such a wealth of caressing under-

standing in his marvelous voice that you couldn't even keep the fierceness of your rage at fever heat?

You could, however, at least be dignified and silent on the long drive home. Kelley did not talk, either, and Lee had nothing to do but watch the road unrolling as the glare from the car lights picked it out. It looked so black, before the lights showed the way. Like life, she thought listlessly. Only sometimes life had total blackouts, and there were no lights at all, even a little way ahead.

She said good-by to Kelley in the car, and he did not try to detain her. "Try to forgive me, Lee," he begged soberly. "You'll feel beter about this when you've had time to think it over. Then perhaps you'll let me call you again."

"I'd rather you didn't, please," she answered in a dead voice, and ran hastily upstairs. If, for the next two hours, she lay with her head buried in her pillows in order to stifle her sobs, that had absolutely nothing to do with Kelley. A girl whose fiancé has gone to war, or at least to a far off Army post, has a perfect right to cry, hasn't she? As for Kelley, if she never saw him or heard his voice again, that was all she asked. Kelley and his Diana!

SHE had her wish, for Kelley neither telephoned nor came in person, and the week dragged by. It was a relief to be sure that he was not going to reappear, but the evenings were long and rather dreary. On Saturday a letter came from Richard, but it was mostly about the hospital and the facilities for his work at the Post. No word about house-hunting for their life together, and no mention of her joining him. "I miss our evenings," Richard wrote, "but work is a great panacea for loneliness."

It was, Lee knew, but there was not much work she could do on a week-end, beyond tidying her small apartment and washing her hair so that it gleamed as if all the sunbeams in the world were woven into its soft tendrils.

On Sunday morning she wrote a long reply to Richard's letter, trying, as she did so, to conjure up his image, and the feeling of his hands and lips.

But the only result of that was to bring back the memory of another kiss, a dynamic, forbidden but thrillingly sweet kiss, the very recollection of which made her cheeks burn and her heart pound dizzily. She jumped up in panicked haste. She would go out somewhere, do something. She certainly couldn't stay here, remembering that kiss.

She pulled herself together then, forcing her mouth to a scornful smile. It would be silly to go out into the heat just to run away from thoughts of a kiss that didn't amount to a thing, actually. It must have been the loveliness of the evening, the place, and the stars overhead which had made it seem more magical than anything she had ever known before. And probably, she told herself, trying to be light about it, being kissed by a mustache was, well, different. But not different enough to drive her from her apartment on a scorching Sunday morning. Especially when it had not meant a thing to the mustache's owner.

The telephone, ringing shrilly in the silence, had a devastating effect upon this newly discovered attitude of indifference. "I won't answer it," Lee told herself fiercely, and lifted the receiver. Because of course it wasn't—

But it was, and for a moment the pounding of her heart almost drowned out the voice coming over the wire. "Good morning, ma'am, we have great news for you," the well-remembered, oddly disturbing voice was saying. "Because this is the day of the Corporation's important thirty-dollar question. Think of it, thirty whole dollars to the lucky winner who can answer this simple query: Could you learn to love Diana?"

"What?" Lee gasped. And then, angrily, "Will you stop this nonsense? I don't even know Diana?"

And don't want to, she was about to add, but the voice broke in again. "But ma'am, that is all arranged for. A free trip with luncheon thrown in out into the green coolness of this glorious countryside, and as an added inducement, a chance to see the beauteous Diana at her best. Her grace, her symmetry—"

Bang! Until she heard it, Lee wasn't quite aware that her hand had acted instinctively, slamming the receiver back into place. Did that lug think he could keep her there at the phone listening to him rave on about his girl in that idiotically ecstatic fashion? What did she care how he felt about Diana? What if it did make Richard's affection for her seem lukewarm and almost platonic by comparison? Richard was what she wanted, wasn't he? To prove how much she wanted him, Lee's head went down onto her arms.

The telephone rang again.

When a telephone rings long and loud enough, you finally answer it or go mad. At the end of seven ear splitting minutes Lee again snatched at the receiver.

"Will you let me alone?" she stormed. But again Kelley's voice drowned out her own.

"Lee, will you listen just one minute? I'm not joking now, and I need you to do a favor for me, a big favor. You see I promised Diana I would bring you to see her, and she's going to think it's awfully funny if I don't. She might even think our times together had meant something special to us both. Will you go with me, just for a little while, to prove to her that everything's all right? Please, Lee, for Diana's peace of mind?"

Did he actually think Lee cared a single possible darn about Diana's peace of mind? But if she refused to go would Diana, and perhaps Kelley, too, have some crazy idea that their times together had had some special meaning for her? It was an intolerable thought. Even going with Kelley, whom she detested, to see Diana, whom she detested even more, would be better than that.

"Very well," she said at last, coldly. "If it's a question of aid to the lovelorn, I suppose you can count me in. But I thought you were the one who boasted that his girl wasn't the jealous type."

It was a good thing she had bought the new and absolutely super white crepe, and the huge floppy white hat with the blue streamers, she thought, trying to keep her hands from shaking as she buckled the wide blue suede belt around her slim waist. If you had to go and meet a smug thoroughly detestable girl who was not only tall, bronze-haired and brown-eyed, but who also possessed enough appeal to cause her lover to positively drivel relating her charms, it helped subtly to know that you were looking your best. Regarding the vision in the glass, which strongly resembled the angel on top of the Christmas tree, Lee reflected that it would not do Kelley any harm to see her in this outfit. Although, of course, she did not care what Kelley thought.

If he thought at all, it showed only in that instant quickening of his mobile face at sight of her. It was gone so quickly that Lee could not even be quite sure it had been there at all, and after that, driving the borrowed car out the parkway and along the Albany Post Road, he chatted so lightly and impersonally that they might have been strangers.

Well, that was what she wanted, wasn't it? Lee thought. It was absurd to feel this vague disappointment because he did not comment on her appearance, or show by even the slightest sign that he remembered the previous Sunday and the picnic in the Jersey hills. If his hands gripped the wheel so rigidly that their knuckles stood out white against the tan, that was doubtless excitement at thought of seeing

Diana, that paragon he worshipped so.

Why was it that some girls had so much, Lee wondered drearily. She could not imagine Richard clenching his hands just at the thought that in a few minutes he would be seeing her again. Suddenly the whole idea of Richard seemed colorless and a little stale, and she found herself beginning to think favorably of joining the WAAC. If they sent her overseas and she failed to return, mightn't it be as well, all around?

"Here we are, Lee," Kelley said quietly, snapping her out of her reverie. So here they were, and it was too late now to back out. In a moment she would be face to face with Kelley's beloved.

The place was not as Lee had imagined it would be. Just a small white farmhouse set among sloping green fields back of Beacon, and surrounded by high wire fences which also enclosed a number of smaller outbuildings which might house chickens. Lee had not thought of Diana in connection with chickens.

"Those are the kennels," Kelley said. He tooted the horn loudly. "Diana will recognize that. She never misses," he boasted proudly.

Lee felt breathless and most unbelievably shy walking up the path beside Kelley, waiting while he unlatched the gate. Where was his fabulous glamour girl and why on earth didn't she appear and get it over with? And what on earth was this whirlwind descending upon them from nowhere, leaping at Kelley, almost devouring him with a moist pink tongue and uttering short, sharp, almost human moans of delight?

Lee shrank away, only to feel her hand seized in Kelley's big one. "Here she is, Lee," he said in a tone that sounded oddly tense and harsh. "Here's my Diana. Do you think you could learn to like her, my dear?"

Unbelievingly Lee stared at the glossy Irish setter. 'Long limbed, with hair like a ripe horsechestnut,' Kelley had said, that first day.

"Kelley," Lee asked in a voice as hushed as if she were in church and witnessing a miracle, "do you mean that this is the only girl you have?"

There was no doubt now about the quickening fire in his eyes. But he did not smile. "The only one I'm sure of, Lee," he said, and he, too, seemed to be speaking of holy things. "But not the only one I love. Not the only one I've wanted, ever since I saw you in the train being brushed off by that stuffed shirt with the M.D. on his diploma. If that little girl loved me, instead, I told myself— But I didn't lie to you, Lee, truly. I had just put Diana on the train, shipped her out here to these kennels, because I can't tell how soon I may be ordered away. Maybe it was a white lie, but I had to do it because how else could I have got to talk to you? You frighten so easily, my darling. Maybe I'm crazy thinking you'd settle for a sergeant instead of being the colonel's lady, but at least this sergeant would know how to love you as you deserve, angel."

"But Richard isn't a colonel. He's only a first lieutenant," Lee said quickly, as if first lieutenants were a dime a dozen. She smiled mistily at Kelley, feeling as if her heart, having been packed in ice for a long time, was slowly melting. Richard was not more than a dim, far off shadow, and the only real thing in the whole world was here, close beside her, in the person of this man for whom she always would come first, who would know how to love as freely and generously as she, would meet her fire with his own.

The sudden overwhelming joy of it was almost more than she could bear. With sublime disregard for the lovely white crepe frock, Lee flopped on the grass beside Diana, her arms encircling the dog's neck, her face buried in the silky coat. "I love you already, you darling thing," she

whispered, "and you must love me too, for Kelley's sake. And you won't have to stay in a kennel any longer, because I shall need you so much when he has to leave. Oh, Diana, we must take care of each other while we wait for the man we both love with all our hearts."

He was down on the grass, too, his arms gathering them close, the small, fair-haired girl in the white frock and the great russet-colored dog. "You mean it, Lee?" he asked in the hushed voice. "Tell me you really mean it, my darling, because if you do, then I have another question."

He did not finish, because her hand was against his lips. Lee faced him shyly, although her violet eyes were pools of mischief. "You've had your turn. Now it's mine," she told him gravely. "You can't expect to ask all the questions in this family." She made her tone very severe. "Listen carefully, Sergeant Kelley Jones, because this is the big important sixty-four-dollar question which makes all you've asked look like peanuts. Do you think it's fair to kiss a girl and make her love it as you did last week unless you mean to marry her, right off today, if it can be arranged?"

He did not answer that one with words at first. Close in his arms with his lips on hers, Lee knew that it was different being kissed by a mustache. So different and so thrillingly sweet that even though Kelley might have to go far away from her for a time, neither of them would ever quite lose that precious contact.

Even with Lee held hard against his chest and his mouth on hers, there was a grimness in the face of Sergeant Kelley Jones which boded ill for anyone who might try to prevent him from giving the correct answer to Lee's sixty-four-dollar queston. "I'll warrant it can be arranged, all right," he told her in a muffled, very solemn voice.

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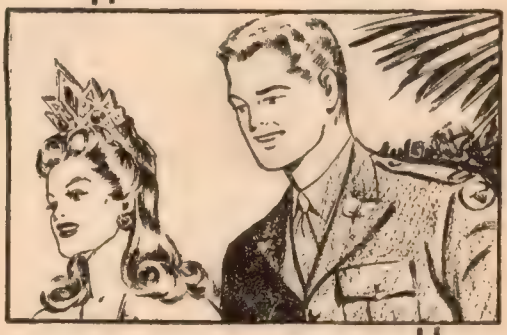

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Too Many Men

By HELEN HIBBARD DAU

When Bart gave Susan pointers on how to get a man he didn't know he was the man she was after.

"YOU'D better step on it," Clare called from the bedroom. "It's after half past seven. Didn't you say you had to be at the Astor by eight?"

Susan was lying on the couch in the living room. She groaned, dropped her magazine on the floor and sat up. She reached for a cigarette and lit it wearily. "What do you suppose it feels like," she said, "to stay home of an evening and read?"

"I ought to know," Clare said. "I do it three or four times a week." She came into the room fastening a rhinestone bracelet on her wrist. She was a tall blond girl, looking even more beautiful than usual in a white evening dress. "The trouble

with you," she said, regarding Susan critically, "is that you're spoiled."

"Bored you mean."

"Spoiled. That's why you're bored."

"What's spoiled about me?"

"Too many men," said Clare. She took a cigarette from the table, sat down, crossing her long lovely legs. "It's phenomenal. You haven't got nearly my looks or style."

"I'm certainly no glamour girl," Susan said wistfully.

Bart said, "We've got him jealous. Now you're in the strategical position of having stood him up."

"But you're cute as pie and friendly and gay."

"And the soldier and sailor boys are lonesome." Susan sighed and stood up.

"You're the girl they would all like to come home to. I'm the girl they want to take out for an evening to show off."

"I'd like someone to think I was a glamour girl just once," Susan said, putting out her cigarette. "It might be a nice change. I might even fall for him."

Clare laughed. "You do all right, darling. You get all of the proposals and none of the propositions. Every man who looks at you thinks that God sent him especially to tuck you under his arm and take care of you for life."

The telephone rang.

"If that's for me," said Susan, "say I'm out. I haven't time to chat."

Clare answered. Her voice drawled, "No, I'm sorry but Susan has just gone out. . . . Why, I imagine you could reach her at her office tomorrow. . . . Yes, I'll tell her." She hung up. "Bill Nelson," she said.

"Who's that?" said Susan.

"How would I know? Just somebody you met some place who has probably decided he wants to marry you. If you can't keep track—" She broke off because the doorbell was ringing. "That's Johnny," she said.

Susan disappeared into the bedroom. She sat down at the dressing table and picked up a comb. Her golden brown hair touched her shoulders and there was a soft bang across her forehead. Her gray eyes were wide and innocent and her small nose tilted slightly. A small girl with a trusting, friendly air, a look of needing protection. Which was deceptive. Susan was very capable. She was twenty-two years old and designed hats for one of the biggest manufacturers in town.

She powdered her nose and got out one of her own craziest models, a cluster of white flowers and a small white veil. She set it on the back of her head. It dressed up her black suit. She snatched up her bag and gloves. She was quite late.

She waved to Clare's friend, Johnny, as she rushed through the living room and out the door. At the corner she jumped into a cab telling the driver to take her to the Astor as quickly as possible.

That was not the cause of the accident. Susan was sure of that, although things happened pretty fast. There was suddenly another taxi coming at them, a screech of breaks, and Susan was thrown violently onto the floor of the cab.

A couple of locked bumpers was the main result of the crash, except for Susan's last pair of nylons which were dirtied at the knees, and her white gloves which were not white any more. Her face was smudged, too, but she did not know about that. She had rescued her hat from one corner of the cab and when she finished telling the policeman that it was not her driver's fault, she stuck it back on her head and hurried off towards the Astor, just two blocks away. Ted was taking her to the theatre and she had promised to meet him at eight o'clock so that they would have time for a drink first. It was now twenty minutes past eight.

As usual there was a mob in the Astor lobby and dozens of khaki uniforms exactly like Ted's. Susan could not find him. She leaned against the wall and decided to let Ted find her. It was not until that moment that she realized how shaken she was. Her knees were knocking together and for no reason at all tears sprang to her eyes.

She must not stand there crying like a dope. She got out her compact and discovered the smudge on her nose and that her hair was a mess. She wiped off the smudge and then she attacked the tears gingerly with her handkerchief.

"That's no way to take it," said a voice beside her.

She lifted startled eyes to a dark hand-

some face a long way above her. Dark eyes smiled at her gravely from under the visor of a Naval officer's cap.

She frowned. "Take what?" she demanded.

He studied her carefully. He said slowly, "When a man stands you up you shouldn't weep in public for the whole world to see. Look nonchalant, amused or bored, as if you didn't give a darn. Don't wear your heart on your sleeve."

This might be a good joke to tell later but at the moment Susan felt irritated. "Quite the little detective, aren't you?" she said.

"You make it pretty easy. Look, I haven't anything to do. I'm just wandering around looking the town over. How about smiling? You've got a date after all. You need a drink and then we'll take in a movie or something."

"Thanks," said Susan shortly. "But I have an engagement."

"Quit kidding yourself, or trying to kid me. You know he's not coming or you wouldn't be crying about it. How long have you been standing here anyway?"

"Honestly!" said Susan with exasperation.

"All right," he said easily. "I'll be honest. I'll tell you some good hard facts. You're no glamour girl. But you'd be cute, in a way, if you'd fix yourself up a bit. I don't mean you would ever knock a man's eyes out but if you'd use tactics, the little old gray matter, you wouldn't find yourself being stood up. Some men are more comfortable with girls who aren't raving beauties. Raving beauties scare them. You'd find somebody. There's somebody for everybody they say."

"How nice to know!" Susan exclaimed sarcastically. She was geting mad. The nerve of him calmly telling her how hard she would have to work to get a man and then insinuating that the best she could hope for was a pretty dull variety.

"Oh, I can teach you a lot of things," he said. "In fact I've decided I'm going to take you under my wing."

He took her hand and tucked it under his arm.

"Now please," said Susan. "Let's not carry this too far."

"The name is Bart Hanning," he said. "What's yours?"

"Hey, Susan!" called a voice from across the lobby and suddenly Ted was making his way through the crowd to her side. "You didn't come," he explained, "and I bumped into a man from my company. We stepped into the bar for a quick one. We'd better get along to the theatre."

"Too bad, old man," said Bart. "But Susan's got a date with me now."

Susan gasped.

"What is this?" demanded Ted. "I've got theatre tickets."

"Take your friend," suggested Bart. "Don't you know that Susan isn't a girl to be kept waiting?"

He had her firmly by the arm. He was forcing her away from Ted, who stood dumbfounded staring after them. Susan thought that the shake up in the cab must really have left her a bit daffy. Why wasn't she putting up a fuss? Why was she just letting him carry her away?

"You see how easy it was?" Bart said to her confidently. "Don't worry, he'll be back tomorrow. Wait and see. Didn't you notice the sudden interest in his eyes when I got in that crack about your not being the kind of girl to keep waiting? That's what I mean by tactics. We've got him jealous and now you are in the very fine strategical position of having stood him up."

"You know so much about these things," murmured Susan sweetly. She was beginning to understand why she had come with him. She would not have missed this for the world. She was going to teach him the lesson of his young life.

"I'm not being smug," he said as he held the door to the bar open for her.

"You see, I've got a girl back home. I know how she handles me. I don't mind. Just as long as she figures I'm worth handling that means she wants me around. I'll show you her picture."

He drew out a chair for Susan at a small table. When he was seated himself he brought out the picture. Susan took it. And if ever she had gazed upon a glamour girl she was gazing upon one now. A tall girl in a sleek slack suit, her hair covered by a turban. She was dark and beautiful and very sure of herself. Susan did not like her.

"Everybody says she ought to be a model," Bart said proudly.

"I'd say so, too," Susan said, and meant it. She gave the picture back. "Are you engaged?"

"Very much so. I promised her I wouldn't go out with other girls, but I don't think she'd mind you."

"Of course not. Obviously I'm not the type a man would like."

"Now look here, I didn't mean to be so hard on you. I just want you to face reality and do something about yourself instead of crying from self-pity. Remember I told you there was a man for everybody. Hold on to that thought and make the most of yourself so you'll be ready for him when he comes along."

It was the waiter who came along just then. They ordered Scotch and sodas. Then Bart looked at her critically.

"I'll tell you the sort of thing I mean," he said. "Here you had a date tonight and you arrive looking as if you hadn't bothered to comb your hair. And if you can't afford a new hat, no hat would be better than one that looks as if it had been kicked around the floor. Lots of girls go around with no hats these days. And it would be a good idea to wear clean gloves, too, and to brush off your suit once in a while. It's not a matter of spending a lot of money. But a man likes a girl to look fresh and neat."

Susan suppressed a desire to giggle. She managed to say wistfully, "I guess you're right. Please tell me more."

"Not all at once," he said. "It will come out gradually. Where do you work?"

"I work for a hat manufacturer."

"Stenographer, I suppose. That's what most girls are. What's the matter with the boss? Won't he give you a new hat at a price?"

"He might," she said.

"Well, don't be so timid. Ask him."

"I might," said Susan. "What were you before the war?"

"A lawyer."

"That's how you know so much about things," she said, smiling sweetly.

"I'm afraid I didn't get very far," he said. "As soon as I passed my bar examinations I joined up."

Susan was thinking that he must be about twenty-four. She asked him where he was from and Bart told her that he had been born and brought up in a suburb of Chicago. He wanted to work in New York after the war. He thought Valerie would like it.

"I'm surprised you didn't go home for your leave," Susan said.

"I would have," he explained, "except that Valerie is away. My leave was sort of sudden and she's visiting a school friend in Virginia. I stayed in New York because there's a chance she might come up at the end of the week."

They finished their drinks and went to a movie. Afterward Bart walked home with Susan. She did not ask him to come in because she was not ready for him to see her smart modern apartment. He did not seem to expect her to.

"This is only Monday," Bart said, "and I've got until Sunday night. Unless Valerie turns up, of course. How about going on with your lessons tomorrow night?"

"You said Ted would surely turn up tomorrow."

"Well, have a cocktail with him but

rush it on account of you've got a dinner date. That ought to get under his skin. I'll pick you up about seven."

"No," Susan said quickly. "I'll meet you at the Astor. You see, I don't want to be afraid ever to meet a man again, after what happened tonight."

"That's right," he agreed. "You've got to learn to be sure of yourself."

Susan had not been home very long when the telephone rang. It was Ted.

"Gosh, Susan," he said, "I didn't think you'd get sore about a little thing like that. You were so late I knew we wouldn't have time for our drink, and this chap came along. I wasn't in the bar five minutes."

"I know," Susan said. "It was all a mistake. You see, Bart somehow got the idea I'd been standing there waiting for hours."

"Who is this Bart, anyway?"

"Just an old friend of the family. You mustn't mind him. He sometimes acts like that. I hope you enjoyed the show."

"How could I?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry, Ted. Are you going to forgive me?"

"Sure, I forgive you. How about cocktails tomorrow? My train leaves at seven you know."

"I know. I'll get away early and try to meet you at four-thirty."

Susan was still awake when Clare came in. She turned on the light and sat up in bed to smoke a cigarette and tell Clare about her adventure.

"You should have seen me," she giggled. "I was a sight from rolling around that taxi floor and I guess it scared me more than I knew because when I couldn't find Ted I couldn't stop the tears from coming, like a ninny."

"This other man sounds like an awful bore."

"He's not. He's not at all," Susan said. "Do you know what I think? I don't think he's really in love with this Valerie. Just infatuated. But he promised her he wouldn't go out with other girls, and I think he was making up excuses to convince himself that she wouldn't mind me. I didn't count."

"How do you know he's not in love with her?"

Susan fell back against the pillow and smiled to herself. "He's too nice to be. I don't like her face—beautiful, but cold and calculating. And I don't like the little things he told me about her."

Clare looked at Susan sharply. "You may think it's going to be a lot of fun to teach him a lesson," she said, "but you'd better be sure the joke's not on you."

"What do you mean?" Susan demanded.

"You might learn a lesson yourself. Remember what I told you about being spoiled by too many men in your life. You've never had to worry about getting one."

"I don't see what that has to do with this situation."

"Don't you?" Clare yawned. "I've got to brush my teeth and get to bed. I'm dead."

SUSAN met Ted at five o'clock the next afternoon.

He said, "How come you're not wearing a hat? Isn't that bad for business?"

She laughed. "I didn't feel like one."

Over cocktails he proposed to her for the eleventh time.

Susan said gently, "I'm sorry, Ted. But I just don't feel that way about you."

Ted finished his cocktail in silent gloom and ordered another. "Tell me this, Susan," he said. "Is there someone else?"

"No, Ted."

"The trouble with you is," he said sadly, "that you've got so many men around all the time I'll bet we all look alike to you. If I were the only man in your life I'd probably look pretty good to you. You'd think a long time before saying no."

Susan did not say anything. She was thinking that what he said was true. Ted had a different face, different nose and eyes and ears from anyone in the world, and yet, to her, he was just like any other man.

She went to the station with him. Ted said that as long as there was no one else he was not going to give up hope, and would she write to him? Susan promised, and stood on tiptoe to give him a light and friendly kiss for good-by.

She took a taxi to the Astor and this time arrived without mishap. Bart was waiting. He had a gardenia for her wrapped in green wax paper. He said, "I thought it might give you confidence to be wearing a flower."

Susan smiled at him and pinned the gardenia to her lapel.

He said, "Wouldn't your boss help you out on the hat situation?"

"Well," she said, "he was sort of too busy today to ask."

"It's an improvement without that dirty white thing anyway."

She held out her hands so that he could see how clean her gloves were. He nodded approval.

"You look quite cute," he said.

"But I'll never be a glamour girl."

"I told you to get that out of your mind. You'll find someone to like you, and when he does you can be sure it's real and not glamour. In the end maybe that's better. Just two people for each other and not a lot of competition." He was frowning suddenly. He took her arm. "How about a cocktail before we eat?"

They went into the bar and he ordered martinis. She said, "I've already had one."

"So I was right about his coming back."

She nodded. "He proposed to me."

Bart was silent a moment. He drilled his fingers on the table and frowned. "You didn't accept him I hope?"

Susan shook her head and he looked relieved. "You mustn't decide right off the bat that he's the one for you. Just because he proposed because I made him jealous. In fact, he doesn't look substantial enough for you. Practically standing you up last night and then making excuses. I don't like that."

When they had finished their cocktails, Bart said, "How would you like to see a little of the town? I thought maybe we'd have dinner in a place where they have a floor show and maybe try a little dancing ourselves."

"I think that would be wonderful."

"Okay." He grinned at her.

The floor show was very good, except that Susan had seen it twice before and the jokes were not new to her. But Bart laughed so hard that it was easy to laugh with him.

When they had finished their first dance, he said, "We don't have to worry about your dancing, anyway. You're a natural born dancer."

"Thank you," she said, and hoped she sounded shy.

In the taxi on the way home Bart suggested, "We might go dancing tomorrow night, too. It does you good to see those places. Gives you something to talk about. People get the impression you've been around a little."

"Yes," she said.

Again he did not seem to expect her to ask him up. He said that he would call for her the next evening.

"I might have to work late," Susan said. "It would be easier to meet you than to come back here."

He grinned. "You're not afraid of meeting people any more then." He put out his hand and rumpled her hair a little. His strong gentle touch gave her an odd warm feeling.

Clare was sitting up in bed reading a magazine. She said, "How is your little joke coming along? When are you going to tell him and how?"

Susan did not answer for a moment. She walked over to the mirror and stood looking at herself thoughtfully. Then she took a cigarette from her bag and sat down.

"I'm not going to tell him," she said as she struck the match. "He thinks he's really helping me. He's too nice to play a joke on."

"You mean you're not ever going to tell him the truth?"

"I don't think so. I'll just let him go on thinking he was right about me. What difference does it make? After this week I'll never see him again."

Clare's eyes narrowed a little. "Susan Brent, have you gone and fallen for this man?"

Susan stared at the glowing tip of her cigarette. "I hope not," she said slowly. "He only likes glamour girls."

WHEN she met Bart the next evening she still was not wearing a hat, but this time there was a small black velvet bow in her hair.

Bart took her hands and grinned at the bow. "You're learning fast," he said.

Only Susan was not enjoying fooling him any more. She felt like a fraud.

They had cocktails and then he took her to a Chinese resturant for dinner. He insisted that she try using chopsticks.

"You want me to starve," she complained. "There's nothing wrong with my figure is there?"

"I hadn't noticed anything wrong with it."

Their eyes met, and for a moment they were both unaccountably embarrassed. Then Susan picked up the chopsticks and they began laughing gayly at her efforts.

Later, when they were dancing, Bart said suddenly, "I was talking to Valerie long distance this afternoon. She's getting in tomorrow night."

"In New York?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"But not until about ten o'clock. We could have dinner together first."

"All right," Susan said quietly.

"I guess I've taught you about everything I could anyway, Susan. I mean you're all right just as you are. You're swell."

"You're pretty swell yourself, sir," she said, smiling gravely.

Somehow the rest of the evening was not so gay. And tonight when Bart took her home he suggested that he come up for a moment for a cigarette.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, "but I'm afraid that Clare will be asleep."

"That's right," he said. "You have a roommate. I forgot."

They said good night. She promised to meet him the next evening for dinner.

When she entered the apartment Johnny was there with Clare. Susan sat down for a moment to talk to them and then she went into the bedroom and closed the door. I can't be in love with Bart, she thought. Not really. It's just my vanity. He doesn't like me like that, and it has piqued my interest.

But she knew for sure when she met him the next evening. Just the sight of his dark face smiling at her. The one face in the world that was different. The one face in the world that was dear to her. He never would be waiting for her like this again. There was a heaviness in her heart that was stifling.

They were very serious during dinner. Impersonally serious. They talked almost entirely about the war.

Valerie's train was due at ten o'clock and Bart was going to meet her. A little after nine he took Susan home in a taxi. Neither of them spoke. Susan thought, I feel as if I were dying.

At her door he held out his hand. "Well, good-by, Susan. Thank you for everything. I've had a swell time."

"Yes," she said softly. "Bart—"

"What, Susan?"

"Would you—kiss me good-by?"

He stared down at her for a moment while her heart beat in panic. Then suddenly he put his arms around her and his mouth was warm and hard against her own. He let her go abruptly and without a word he strode back to the cab and jumped in, slamming the door after him.

Susan was shaking so that she could hardly climb the stairs. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Clare was sitting in the living room putting red polish on her nails. She took one look at Susan and said quietly, "I was afraid of something like this."

Susan sat down limply and took out a cigarette.

"Light one for me too," Clare said.

Susan handed her the lighted cigarette and took out another for herself. "Clare, what am I going to do? What makes one man different from all the rest?"

"It's something called love, they tell me," Clare said. "Susan, you don't want me to say all the old things about working hard, and time making you forget and meeting another man do you?"

"Please don't. Please let's not talk about it at all." Susan stood up and snapped on the radio. She turned the dial to an orchestra and sat down again. She closed her eyes and put her head against the back of the chair and did not even hear the music.

It was a long time before she suddenly got up and turned off the radio.

"Clare, why shouldn't I try?"

Clare was waving her fingers in the air to dry. "Try what?"

"Try to be a glamour girl. If this other girl really isn't so nice perhaps Bart would like me better. I'll put my hair on top of my head and get something devastating to wear and—"

"You've never had your hair set in your life. It's naturally curly and doesn't need it."

"I'll have it set within an inch of its life. Lots of goo on it so it won't go soft and girlish but will be beautifully sophisticated. We'll give a cocktail party Saturday afternoon. I'll call him at his hotel and ask them both. We'll have lots of men—"

"Bart will catch on to the little prank you've been playing."

"I'll explain about that. The main thing," Susan said, eagerly, "he'll see I can be a glamour girl if he wants me to be."

"I'm not sure I like the idea," Clare said.

"Let's see who we'll have," Susan said excitedly.

WHEN Susan got back from the hairdresser Saturday afternoon Clare gaped at her. "Heavens!" she exclaimed. "It worked!"

Susan hugged her happily. "Just wait. I'm going to put on a very white make-up and a very red mouth and in those black pajamas—"

"I like you better as yourself," Clare said, "but if this is what you want—well, don't go around hugging people girlishly. It spoils the effect."

"Oh, I won't. I'll keep my eyebrows lifted and look amused and once in a while a little bored."

"Susan, what is this going to do to you if it's a flop?"

Susan suddenly was quiet. "I don't know," she said. "I won't be any worse off than if I hadn't tried, will I?"

"You said Bart didn't want to come."

"He didn't, but I coaxed. I hinted that it was your party and I was sort of desperate to collect a few friends of my own to come."

"So he thinks he's really coming just to help you out again?"

"Yes. But, darling, we mustn't stand here chatting. There are flowers to fix and canapes and I've got to get dressed."

"You get dressed," Clare said. "I've got nearly everything ready."

Susan had asked Bart and Valerie for half an hour later than everybody else. Of course they all did not arrive promptly but those who did stared at her in amazement. "Susan, what have you done to yourself?"

"I felt like being different," Susan said, "and I don't want to hear any remarks about it."

Every time the doorbell rang Susan braced herself to look nonchalant. Inwardly she quaked with fear.

It was Clare who finally opened the door for Bart and Valerie. Valerie was exactly like her picture, only now she was wearing a stunning afternoon dress and a fur jacket.

Susan steadied her knees and said, "Oh, hello, Bart. How nice of you to come."

Bart did not smile or say anything for a moment. He stared at her, then his eyes moved around the smart modern apartment and back to her again. "Hello, Susan," he said shortly. He introduced Valerie.

Valerie nodded coolly. There was an angry glint in her eyes. Susan thought, I've made her jealous. I must look all right. But somehow she found herself wishing in panic that she had not given this party. From a long way off she heard her voice introducing Clare and other people to Valerie and Bart. The other people were mostly men, and mostly men in uniform. They spoke to Susan as if they knew her very well. They said things like "Remember that night at the Stork, Susan?"

She was conscious of Bart's face, stiff and a little white. If she could only get him alone to explain. She began to feel a little dizzy, but it was not from the one cocktail she had tasted.

She went into the bedroom, closed the door and stood in the middle of the floor. In a moment the door opened.

"May I come in?" Valerie said. She came in. She was holding a cocktail glass in her hand and she leaned against the foot of a bed and regarded Susan coolly. "So you're the simple little girl Bart's in love with."

Susan's heart caught. She did not say anything. She stood there staring at the other girl.

Valerie gave a little laugh. "He told me all about you last night. A very good story. He said he meant to go on with our engagement but he found that he could not. I said all right, if he was the kind who could fall for a little hick like that he wasn't the man I thought he was, anyway. He didn't want to bring me here today but I thought it would be amusing. I suppose he called you back to warn you to dress the part of the little hick, but you wouldn't."

Susan tried to find words but she felt numb all over.

"You're not going to get away with it. Bart is very angry about what you've done or haven't done. I can see that. I'm not going to be cut out by an equal. I suppose you know his family are tremendously wealthy. Well, I can handle him, my dear. If he were going soft and sentimental about some innocent little thing, I was willing to give up because I know he's not really in love with me. But he's not in love with you either, then, because you're just like me."

"No," Susan said. She ran past Valerie and out of the room. Clare was in the kitchen fussing with ice cubes. Susan grabbed her arm. "Clare, send Bart in to me. Only don't tell him I'm here. Ask him to get something for you."

Clare looked at Susan's face for a moment, nodded, and went out.

In a moment Bart pushed through the swinging door. When he saw her he stopped short.

"Bart!" she took a quick step toward him.

"Clare asked me to get another plate of canapes," he said. He glanced away from her toward the table.

"Bart, I have to talk to you."

"Do you? I suppose you're tired of your glamour girl life and want to be simple and real. You'd like me to help you."

"Bart—" she said helplessly.

"Susan, you made a fool of me once. Let's drop it. A man doesn't like to think that a girl's been laughing at him all the time. Especially when he— Are these the canapes?" He strode passed her and took the plate from the table.

"Bart, it wasn't like that!" she cried desperately.

But Bart went out the door without looking back. Susan gripped the edge of the table for support. It was not enough. She had to sit down.

"Susan!" Clare came in. "Are you all right?"

Susan nodded.

"I suppose you heard her," Clare said. "I could kill her. Out there clinging to his arm, telling everybody they're going to get married on his next leave. Susan, it just didn't work, that's all. I wish you wouldn't look like this. You said you wouldn't be any worse off than before."

"He loved me," Susan said shakily. "He told her he couldn't marry her. But when he discovered I'd fooled him, about not knowing men or anything, he didn't even give me a chance to explain. He hates me."

"You need a drink."

"No."

But Clare was gone. When she came back she had a drink, but she had other things too. A comb, a box of powder, a white frilly pinafore apron.

She thrust the drink at Susan. "Swallow that, and no nonsense." She attacked Susan's hair with the comb.

"Clare—"

"You keep quiet," Clare ordered.

She got water from the sink and dampened Susan's hair so that it curled up naturally. She wiped off the white make-up and put on the powder that matched Susan's warm skin. She made her stand up while she tied the apron around her.

"There!" she said. "You're practically yourself again. And remember for the rest of your life that, when you hear it's best for people to be themselves that it's not kidding. Come on."

She took Susan's hand and gently pushed her out the door.

She laughed gayly as they went into the living room together. "I'm afraid I'm a little tight," Clare announced. "I slopped my cocktail all over Susan. Her fancy pajamas are ruined."

"Even on her hair?" someone asked.

"I was trying a trick," Clare said.

"Never mind, Susan." A soldier came over and put his arm around her. "Don't look so stricken. Our Susan is herself again and I, for one, like her better that way."

"I'm never going to drink again," Clare said. "Will someone please pour me a cocktail? I've made a mess of everything for Susan. She's in love with a man she thinks only likes glamour girls so she wanted to turn into a glamour girl for him."

"What does Susan need glamour for?" demanded the soldier. "She's got something better. Let me at any man who doesn't like her just as she is."

"Whee," Clare said. "I'm afraid I'm talking too much. Where's my drink?"

Susan wished that Clare would not try so hard. It was not going to do any good. It was just making things worse. Bart had Valerie by the arm. He was saying that they had to go.

He shook hands with Clare and turned to shake hands with Susan.

"Good-by," she said stiffly.

"Susan—"

"Please," she said. "Let's not be grim."

He went out with Valerie.

Someone brought Susan a cocktail. She managed a smile. I'll get drunk, she thought. That's what I'll do. Then I won't feel anything.

But she could not have got so tight on one sip of the drink that she was suddenly seeing things. Bart was coming into the apartment alone.

He came right to her. He said, "Susan, I've got to talk to you alone." He took her hand and led her into the kitchen.

She said, "Bart, what's the use?"

"I tried to tell you that I'd call you later," he said. "But you wouldn't listen. So I told Valerie what I had to tell her in a hurry and put her into a cab. Sit here." He boosted her up onto the kitchen table and stood in front of her, holding her hand tightly.

He did not say anything for a moment and then he smiled. "There are a couple of things we've got to get straight. I fell in love with you because you were different. You weren't a glamour girl and you didn't try to be. I was sick of chasing a girl a whole lot of other men were chasing, and of being managed. I guess I've been sick of it a long time. But I was engaged to Valerie and I thought maybe I ought to go through with it, and then I found I couldn't. I loved you too much. It wouldn't have been fair to her. I told her that last night after you called me. She insisted upon coming to the party anyway. I was going to tell you just as soon as I could. And then I came and found—"

"Something that made you think I'd been making a fool of you," Susan said.

He nodded. "But why did you pretend that men didn't like you?"

"I didn't. You just assumed that, and it made me mad and I decided to teach you a lesson. You were so nice, and I thought you liked girls like Valerie and I wanted to show you I could be like that, too."

He put his arms around her and his cheek against hers. "You're the only girl I could like girls to be like, and there's only one of you."

"You're the only one who has ever been different too, Bart. I don't flirt with men. They just like me because I'm friendly."

"Who wouldn't like you?" he said. "But please, Susan, I always want to be the one who is different."

"Always," she whispered.

He grinned at her. "Now," he said, "I want to know why you were wearing that dirty hat?"

She laughed. "I'd been in a taxi accident. That was why I was crying, too. But I design hats for a living."

"Let other women wear hats. I don't want your lovely hair covered up," he said huskily.

He kissed her hair, and then her lips while she clung to him.

HIT HITLER AND HIROHITO

HARDER—HARDER—HARDER!

BUY WAR BONDS

A Picture To

By JANE LEVINGTON COMFORT

Connie knew that a little tenderness would send a soldier off to war, ready to beat the world.

THE soldier standing in the moonlight looked like Paul. He was tall enough and slim enough, but a thrill of strangeness went through her. She ducked into the pool of shadow that a date palm threw upon the white walk and watched him for a moment, knowing now that it really was Paul, yet feeling the strangeness still.

The moon was full tonight, a brilliant contrast to the dimmed-out street. Three months ago she would have known the mood Paul was in and his very thoughts by the way he flung about as he waited for her. Now he stood straight and still. The difference between a boy and a man was three months at Camp, she thought. She need not worry any more about Paul's being too young. Eighteen notwithstanding, he was fledged, he was a soldier. Pride in her son crowded the ache out of thirty-four-year-old Connie Gammon's heart and she stepped forward.

"It's funny the air raid warden doesn't tie a black bonnet around that moon," she said. "It's breaking dimout regulations."

Paul's kid laugh had not changed. "I was just thinking the same thing. Gee, Connie!" He swung her out for a look. "Didn't know you were going to dawg up like that. Gosh, you're beautiful."

She glowed. It was a dress he had not seen—white, her most flattering color—and she had a tricky sequined scarf looped under her chin and round her slim shoulders, hooding her long light hair.

"Thanks, darling. I hoped you'd think so. Did you finish up?"

He looked blank for an instant.

"You said there was something you had to see about."

"Oh. Yeah. I saw about it." His mouth widened in a dreamy smile. "Only it's not finishing, Connie, it's starting."

They strolled up Del Oro Drive, past shop windows whose displays were barely visible, past cocktail lounges whose neon signs were dark. The California coast was fragrant with citrus blossoms tonight and Private Paul Gammon had a beatific smile on his lips.

People's eyes seemed to bless them both in passing. "A soldier out with his girl," their smiles said. The compliment was especially precious to Connie tonight, reminder though it was that tomorrow night at this time Paul would be gone. Not back to school, not east to visit his father—gone! This was their last evening together for a long time, long enough to change them both, long enough to change the world.

The awful ache came rushing back. To check it Connie told herself that she had been through this evening so often in anticipation that it was little more than a memory even now, except that she still had the power to make it happier for him. Most memories were pretty rigid. This one still had the warmth of life in its veins. And we're together, she thought. My son wanted me with him.

Take With Him

"You're the prettiest girl I ever saw," the soldier said, "much less danced with."

"Know what, Connie? I've been thinking. It's a good thing I'm going away, for you, I mean. You'll have a chance to live your own life for a change."

Connie smiled inwardly. So he had been racking his brains to think of something that would make it easier for her, and this was it. Well, she had been racking her brains, too. She longed to speak gentle confidence-inspiring words that would stay alive in his memory and be there when he needed them most. For two days now she had been searching for wise sweet thoughts to slip between the bulky essential matters of every day, like that packet of photographs Paul would find among his things whenever, wherever, he unpacked, too light to burden him, yet comforting later on.

She said, "You're my life, darling. You've always been."

"I know it, Connie, but that's wrong. You shouldn't have given me so much. You've cheated yourself. I didn't know that before, but I know it now. That man from Cleveland who used to hang around when we lived over in Glendale—Feldman. He wanted to marry you, didn't he? Bet you'd have had him, too, if it hadn't been for me."

"What brought this on?" she asked, amazed.

"You know, I hated that chap, but I don't know why. You ought to have slapped me down."

She shook his arm: "Paul, who has been talking to you? Aunt Georgia—when you went over to say good-by to her this afternoon?"

He laughed. "Now don't get steamed up, Connie. Nobody talked to me. Something's happened, that's all, and I understand things better. All I'm saying is you'll have a chance to catch up with things with me off your hands."

She was shaken. What had happened? What idle rumors had he heard? We haven't time to hurt each other, she thought queerly. Only a few more hours.

They stopped for a glass of beer. The proprietor of the little place greeted Paul like a long lost son:

"Well, well, well! How's the boy? How's the boy?"

"Bearing up," Paul grinned. "About the same as I was twenty minutes ago when I was in here talking to you."

The bartender ducked his head ingratiatingly between massive shoulders and swabbed the counter near them. "Just trying to be the soul of discretion, Paul. I didn't want to get you in Dutch with this young lady by admitting I just saw you out with another gal, did I? Even if she wasn't half as pretty as the one you got now."

Connie smiled her thanks. Paul let out one of his spontaneous kid laughs. "Gee, Tony, that's great. Let me present my mother!"

Tony sobered, peered at Connie. "Thought I heard you call her 'Connie'. If it don't beat all," he marvelled. "Well, lady, all I can say is, you don't look more'n three years older'n your son."

"Who was your 'other girl', darling?" Connie asked as they drank their beer. It was an idle question. She was still waiting to hear what had happened to bring the "man from Cleveland" matter to his mind.

"You'll meet her tonight," Paul said. "She'll be at The Dim Out by the time we get over there. She works at Lockheed. She had just come from work when I brought her in here. No wonder Tony wasn't much impressed with her looks!"

"Where did you meet her, dear?"

"At a dance last night. Her name's Sharon Sprague."

"Paul," Connie began, "I don't understand."

"I think you will when you see her," he said quickly.

"I mean about what you were saying before we came in here. Listen, darling,

you've always meant more to me than anyone else in the world. There's no cheating oneself when one feels that way about it, Paul. I just wanted you to know."

He gave her a glad wondering stare. "Connie, *she* said practically the same thing to me tonight. Sharon. I told her I didn't want to call it being engaged because that might make her feel tied down. All I wanted was what we'd already had since last night and her picture to take with me, but Sharon said, 'It's not like being tied down if it's what you want more than anything else in the world—' "

THE DIM OUT was crowded as usual, but they found a booth to the left of the dance floor. The place featured dizzy lighting effects so that Connie first saw Sharon Sprague in a sunburst yellow glare which turned an angry red and slowly purpled. She was feeling the shock by this time and was rather numb. Girls, of course. Any number of them. But not *the* girl, not the bond to end bonds. Yet here Sharon was with her soft young chin in her hands and a crinkle of incredulity between her brows saying:

"Paul told me you were lovely, Mrs. Gammon, I expected that. But he didn't say you were a beauty or so young."

Connie felt her own frozen smile of acknowledgement. Paul had taken the place at the girl's side, so that she was looking across at the two of them: a brown-haired, blue-eyed girl with funny little dimples high up in her cheeks which flickered when she was puzzled, as now, and came for a visit when she smiled; and her Paul, yet not her Paul—never quite that again.

Sharon looked about seventeen and had sense enough to dress her own age. The gaze she turned from her unabashed scrutiny of Paul's mother's face to Paul himself was frankly possessive and Paul looked as pleased as a puppy. "Look, I'm owned!" his eyes said.

A door was closing in Connie's face. It happened to be the door of the only home she knew. She was thirty-four and looked a scant twenty-five, yet this girl had thrust her out into a cold lonely nowhere, indefinitely located between the generations. No longer young in their sense, lacking both the dignity and the authority of middle-age, where did she belong?

A chance to live her own life. That had been a gentle way of saying that Paul had found a life of his own in which she could have no part, and he was considerate enough to realize that he had absorbed the years of her youth. It was as difficult an adjustment in its way as the realization that her schoolboy son was going to war. Well, she had passed that crisis successfully. They had never been separated before, yet her letters to him at Camp contained nothing of her loneliness or longing or fear.

Her reward for this had been his sudden leap to maturity. But that she would have to share the privilege of giving Paul to his country and even take a back seat (or the one opposite) in the process had been no part of the strenuous training program which Connie had set for herself. I just need a little time, she thought. Just give me a moment more.

Some women are mothers first and Connie Gammon was one of these. That was why she had sent John Feldman away, and it was also why she was able to convince herself so quickly about Sharon Sprague. What else mattered if Paul had picked the right girl? Apparently he had. Sharon had about her that something sweet and something strong, something warm and something wise which the right girl always has. She was sure of herself, as wholehearted vital people have a right to be. And she was as much in love as if she and Paul had known each other years. Also, and Connie did not doubt it for a moment, Sharon was in love for the first time. The two were in that most delect-

able of emotional states, first love, and the time that it takes to spoil it would be denied them at least for a while. Tonight alone would fill their memory galleries with idyllic pictures to decorate their hearts and make them livable forever.

In Paul's face Connie saw that glow of confidence which she herself had hoped to inspire. The pictures he would take with him would not be a record of their home life together, but previews of a future life with Sharon, which was quite as it should be. *Just give me a moment more!*

Whether superfluously or not, Connie offered them her sanction. She murmured encouragingly when Sharon spoke and averted her eyes from the too intimate spectacle of their delight in each other. She urged them to dance.

Dancing together they moved in a kind of hovering, timeless bliss. They seemed entirely removed from the pressure of time that hammered on her nerves. Three or four hours? A lifetime together! It must be that essences were being released to them which normal living would have spread out over an indefinite number of days and nights. Speeded up—that was the order of the day. All out—that was the tempo of the time and it was a rhythm that Paul and Sharon moved to without an extra breath.

Afterwards they returned to the booth, replete with each other, ready to be generous with her again.

She asked just one thing, an excuse to get away. She could not just get up and leave them, or could she?

It was so much easier than she had thought. Paul's eyes had flown to hers, anxious, inquiring, but he seemed satisfied with the excuse she fabricated. Sharon obviously was relieved.

Although scarcely able to navigate through the crowd that packed the dance floor, Connie was alone now and frighteningly aware of it. Her lids burned, her throat ached. Years had crept into those minutes at the table. If she ever got out of here she was going to weep torrents.

Halfway along the fringe of the crowd the band stopped and Connie thought *now!* But the dancers stood where they were clapping until the music resumed, moving them along. Fans of iridescent light shot up the walls, then an enchanted night shut down. Faces shimmered starlike in the blue. The kettledrum soloed.

Six-feet-two of soldier was blocking her way. Connie supposed that he, like herself, must be trying to pass, but he bulked even larger as her eyes lifted inquiringly to his face.

"Would *you* dance with a fellow?" he asked.

His emphasis implied that somebody else recently would not. He looked to be only three or four years older than Paul and as healthy but lonely and desperate, as Paul might have looked if neither of his women had turned up tonight.

"I'd sure appreciate it, Miss," he added, respectful but urgent.

Any other time Connie would have been glad to dance with him, but not in this swollen aching moment.

"Sorry, Soldier, I have to leave."

She could not help seeing what her refusal did to him. From hope to despair can be a fairly short trip at times, but he covered the distance in nothing flat. Her immediate thought was, The poor boy must have bet somebody his shirt that this elderly blonde would dance with him if he asked her to, and he doesn't want to lose it—the shirt. His face seemed to have gone quite green, pallor with a shine, like Paul's face when he was sick or in trouble.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"Must be. Is my face dirty? Do I look like a carrier or something? Can't be halitosis, I haven't been that close to anybody."

She laughed. "I thought I was in a hurry, but it can wait."

"Gee, you're regular."

He actually must have paled because the light had not changed, the enchanted night still held, yet his face looked ruddy enough now and almost as smooth as Paul's. Only a few years older than Paul, another Superman, junior, whose ranks would win the war because they had not learned caution yet or lost their faith in life. At that age it did not take much to set them right again: a little tenderness, arms around them, and they were ready to beat the world. It had happened many times before: a crisis of her own brushed aside to deal with Paul's troubles. What was a mere heartache beside a cut thumb or hurt feelings?

The arms around him were a mother's arms, but the soldier could not know that. This occurred to her a moment later when the terrific all-ness of youth burst from his eyes into hers. In one look his heart came forward and solemnly bestowed itself.

"If those others hadn't given me the rain check I might never have seen you," he muttered. "You're ten times prettier than they were. Prettiest girl I ever saw, let alone danced with."

"Easy, Soldier. Wait till the lights come on!"

"I saw you coming through the crowd," he said. "I kept watching for the chap with you. I just wanted to see what he'd have to look like, the lad that would get to go out with you. And there wasn't any man, you were alone. And I thought, That's because there aren't any good enough, but they can't kill me for trying."

"Soldier," Connie laughed, "you'd better be careful how you throw that line of yours."

He gave her a deadly serious look that was tinged with reproach. "If it's a line I'm on the end of it," he said. "I went overboard for you the first thirty seconds, but don't get me wrong. I know why you're dancing with me, because you're regular and I worked on your sympathy. That's all, but it's enough," he said. "You'll never know how much this means to me."

Connie found herself shaking with soft inward mirth, which was amazing when she considered her state of mind five minutes ago. She felt a sudden gratitude to this boy whose young imagination had recreated her to herself, bringing her back from Nowhere to Here. All four of them had needed something desperately, she thought. Paul and Sharon, too. And each had found the answer.

Another funny thing about these days—a single moment could hold so much of balm.

"I mean," he went on, speaking slowly and with seriousness, "I needed this to happen to me tonight. It's my last night here and I needed a girl's face to take with me. An American girl's face," he qualified, "and a pretty one. That was my order. Maybe it sounds goofy, but I didn't need to know who she was or what she was, or even her name. All I needed was to touch her, like I'm touching you now, and look at her enough times to be able to remember her face, as I'll always remembers yours. That's all I need—a picture to take with me."

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigency of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

Island Girl

Shag was expected back to Hawaii to run a plantation—but war and a selfish fiancée intervened.

SHERRY WRIGHT tried to concentrate on the neat figures she entered in the cash book, but they seemed to form the words, *Shag is coming home today. Shag is coming back to Maui.* Outside the office windows the trade wind whispered the same words tantalizingly.

Sherry twisted restlessly and eyed *Keiki,* the handsome old white-haired, part-Hawaiian bookkeeper of Lunar Bow Sugar Plantation, as he busily entered figures in a ledger. He glanced up, his bright black eyes lingering fondly on Sherry's copper-colored hair, pert little nose and hazel eyes.

"Better you take afternoon off," he said, a smile tugging at his mouth, "and have a good time when that young owner of Lunar Bow comes home today."

Shag had telephoned *Keiki* that morning from Honolulu that he was back for a short leave from the South Pacific and was flying over to the island of Maui in the afternoon. As soon as Sherry heard, an electric happiness tore through her, making it impossible for her to keep her mind on anything but Shag.

"But all this work, *Keiki,*" she protested, "I should finish it."

"Tomorrow better," he insisted.

Sherry still hesitated, torn between a sense of duty and the wild urge to be at the plantation when Shag arrived.

"Scram, *wikiwiki*—quick," *Keiki* said, "and see *Maile* have guest rooms ready. Shag is bringing friends."

Sherry tensed. Would Diana Reed be one of those friends? Was Shag still engaged to her? A cold feeling of fear and uncertainty went over Sherry. She swallowed hard and began to put away her books.

"Friends?" she asked faintly. "Do you know who?"

Keiki shook his head. "I think some of old crowd." He frowned. "Hope Diana person not along. Had full of her before. If war not come she might have grab Shag." *Keiki* searched Sherry's face intently. "I scared for while." He clucked. "Not too late yet. She got strong mind of own."

Sherry avoided *Keiki's* probing eyes as she straightened her desk. And Diana Reed is the most beautiful woman I know, she thought, her heart twisting.

Keiki went on unhappily, "Hope Shag come back after war and run plantation like his grandfather, and his father. Not to have Diana for wife though. She be restless here. Make Shag unhappy. Like his mother, her heart never in Maui." *Keiki* sighed. "Much too bad she keep Shag away from Lunar Bow all that long time. He island boy in his heart."

Sherry got up swiftly, trying to quiet

By ANNE FOWLER HILL

Shag said, "You can't go to the caves, Diana. They're tabu." "That's childish," Diana said petulantly.

the unnamed fear inside her. If Diana Reed was with Shag today, it could mean only one thing: He still loved her.

THE day seemed to have lost its shining brilliance as Sherry climbed into her small roadster and drove toward the plantation, past fields of sugar cane rippling and rolling in jade green swells as the tradewind brushed over it.

Why, Sherry wondered over and over, should it matter to her if Diana Reed was with Shag? Diana and Shag had raced around together with the same crowd in all parts of the world. He must love her, or he wouldn't seem so gay playing around with her. Why should I care? Sherry thought. I'm just the daughter of his foreman. He hardly knows I'm around, if he thinks of me at all.

Her eyes ached with hot unshed tears. She could not remember the time when she had not loved Shag. Memories of his visits to Maui rushed over her. He was a gangling youngster when his mother first brought him for brief vacations to the Islands.

Shag was something of a legend to Sherry even then. She followed him around, wide-eyed and adoring, and he nicknamed her Cricket because she was so small and brown.

Island born and Island raised, Sherry rode a horse and swam almost before she could walk. She helped teach Shag to ride and showed him tricks about swimming, too, in the buoyant, aquamarine sea which bordered part of the great acres belonging to Lunar Bow. Those days had never been long enough for Sherry, and each time Shag's mother, a New Yorker, took him away, nothing seemed the same.

Sherry remembered hearing her father and mother talk about Shag's beautiful mother. She was never happy at Lunar Bow, and when Shag's father was injured in a polo game and later died, she left immediately for the Mainland. She was content to live in New York and Europe, dragging little Shag around with her, living off the amazing dividends from the plantation. Sherry's father had been left in charge of Lunar Bow and she had become a part of the plantation life.

Sherry remembered, too, how the little brown-eyed boy with his crisp black hair and merry laugh followed the Filipino, Portuguese, Hawaiian and Japanese plantation hands about, listening raptly to their tales and legends.

Then something happened when Shag was thirteen that caused everyone to wonder if he would ever return to the islands. He had been fascinated by a tale of his father who, when only fifteen, had roped a crafty wild bull.

Fairly bursting with excitement, he had whispered to Sherry, "We're going to rope a wild steer, Cricket." And Sherry, being eleven and afraid of nothing, consented eagerly. Early next morning they crept noiselessly out of the house.

Shag urged his gelding, Blackie, to a fast pace. It was all that Sherry, on her mare, Pretty Boots, could do to keep up with him. Just at dawn they stopped on a ridge high on the slopes of the extinct volcano, *Haleakala*. Shag jumped from Blackie and tried his lasso of braided rawhide. Then suddenly Blackie stiffened, his head tense and high. Shag leaped back on his horse, crying to Sherry, "Let's go."

She remembered the treacherous lava pits and called out to Shag. He was diving down the steep incline and did not hear. Sherry streaked after him, but she was too late. Blackie, with unerring instinct, skimmed over three pits, but one was hidden by dense brush and Sherry, frozen with fright, saw Shag and Blackie plunge violently out of sight.

Pretty Boots stopped instinctively and Sherry crept to the edge of the pit. Far below she saw the still forms of Shag and Blackie. Somehow she got back to her father and they returned to rescue Shag.

He was conscious when they brought him up, but his left arm hung limply at his side. Tears rained down his cheeks, not because of the pain in his arm, but because Blackie was dead.

Shag's mother took him away immediately. She kept him away eight years. At first Shag wrote to Sherry, but gradually the letters stopped. Years later she saw him in the rotogravure sections of the Sunday papers, tall, broad-shouldered, good-looking in careless sport clothes sailing his yacht or flying an airplane. More and more frequently lovely Diana Reed appeared in the pictures with him.

AS she stopped the car in front of Lunar Bow she gazed with misty eyes at the old plantation house, slumbering and beautiful in its groves of cocoanut palms and tropical trees, almost smothered in the wild growth of flowers. It was the only home she had known, and if Shag married Diana Reed now and left her at Lunar Bow until after the war, Sherry and her father would have to move into one of the smaller houses.

That, Sherry knew, would be intolerable. She would have to leave. A shuddering sigh went through her and she slowly got out of the car, her whole body aching with the thought, Will Diana Reed be with Shag?

She did not have to wait long to find out, for Shag's white car, with one of the Hawaiian servants driving, slid up the palm-lined driveway. The first person Sherry saw was Diana Reed, all in beige and looking more vividly beautiful than ever.

Sherry wanted to turn and run, for hot tears stung her eyelids, but Shag called to her. Her heart lurched sickeningly as the car stopped and she saw him, thin and worn and tired looking, but straight and tall in his white Navy lieutenant's uniform with Navy wings gleaming on his chest. Her eyes flew to his and he held them for a long time, a peculiar odd light shining in their brown depths.

Fear locked Sherry's throat as she saw him get out of the car painfully. She said in a stricken voice, "You've been wounded."

"It's nothing, Cricket," he said, smiling, and her breath tightened at the old nickname, but she noticed his smile was not as bright and flashing as it had been. "Just a piece of shrapnel in my foot," he went on. "That's why they gave me leave."

Sherry rushed to help him, but Diana Reed, throwing Sherry a cool, arrogant smile, pushed ahead of her. She put her arm about Shag, murmuring possessively, "Be careful, dear."

The Hawaiian servants poured out of the house to meet Shag, quick tears of joy rolling down their cheeks.

Shag smiled at them. "It's nice to be home again," he said slowly.

Sherry's heart leaped. He really had said home. He had not said it on his last visit.

But Diana Reed said coolly, "Home for a few days. Then we're leaving for the Mainland. I have droves of influential friends. I know they'll fix it for Shag to be transferred to a base on the coast. We'll be married before we sail."

Sherry felt herself shaking and caught her breath hard to steady herself. She could not see Shag's face, for Yat See, the old Chinese cook, rushed up and boldly took possession of Shag, saying to Diana, "Excuse, missee, but I help like when he little fellow and run to Yat See for hurt."

Diana Reed fell back, but her face was furious. The old Chinaman did not seem to mind. His wrinkled parchment face was beaming, and he was shaking with silent laughter. "Sonna-gun," he said, "those Jap sonna-guns. I glad they not kill owner of Lunar Bow. I got nice curry like you like when you little thing. You see."

Sherry wanted to get away so she flew ahead to see that everything was in order

in the guest rooms, but her throat ached unbearably. Why couldn't Shag come back after the war? He belonged at the plantation. Everyone loved him. Even old Yat See's oriental calm was broken and he was acting like the warm-hearted, open-armed Hawaiians who were so lavish with their love and affection.

They did not like Diana Reed, though. They remembered her last visit. Sherry heard them muttering and shaking their heads when they spoke of her. "No good for Mister Shag," they said. "Much too big cold in heart. Better he not make marry with her."

Shag and Diana went to their rooms, and Sherry, alone at last, dropped down on one of the huge porch swings on the cool *lanai*. She gazed at the blue-gold day without seeing it, wishing miserably that she had stayed at the office with *Keiki*. But she had found out what she wanted to know. Shag loved Diana Reed.

SHERRY began to pace the *lanai*, trying to brush aside all thoughts of Shag and Diana Reed, but the past wouldn't let her alone. She remembered the other time Shag had brought Diana to Lunar Bow.

It was only a short time before the world was rocked by the attack on Pearl Harbor. Months before, Shag's mother had been killed in a plane crash in South America, and Shag, with a crowd of New York friends, had appeared suddenly at Lunar Bow.

Sherry had returned to the plantation from an early morning ride just as a long, white and chromium car shot up the avenue and stopped in front of the house. She was in tan riding breeches and shirt, her copper hair windblown and flying. To avoid meeting the visitors she wheeled her horse and started for the side entrance, but she was too late.

A tall, tanned young man in white sport clothes leaped out of the car and ran toward her. He waved and flashed a smile. With her heart pounding furiously she recognized Shag.

The earth seemed to sway, and dazedly she slid from her horse. He grabbed both of her hands, his brown eyes eager. "Why little Cricket, you've grown up." He laughed down at her joyously. "I'd have known you anywhere, those eyes and that copper hair, and these strong little hands."

She was glad he was looking at her hands. It gave her a chance to quiet the wild thudding of her heart. At last the earth stopped swaying a little and she said breathlessly, "Why, Shag, Shag—"

A high tinkling laugh cut between them, and Sherry broke away, startled by the sound. She saw Diana Reed put her arm possessively through Shag's, and her breath tightened. Diana was even lovelier than her pictures. Tall, slender, with her pale silky pompadour, slanting green eyes, luscious red mouth, and gorgeously simple white sport clothes.

Shag introduced Sherry to Diana and to some of the others who had strolled over from the car. Conscious of her rumpled riding clothes and windblown look, it was all that Sherry could do to retain her poise. She was glad for an excuse to hurry into the house to find *Maile*, the old Hawaiian housekeeper, and arrange for the guests.

The word got around swiftly that young Shag was back, and late that afternoon neighbors from nearby plantations and ranches gathered for a *luau*. Long tables, laden with flowers and ferns and heaped with food—roast pig, fish, rice *poi*, pineapples, bananas, papayas, mangoes, cocoanuts—were set out for the crowd.

Later, musicians strummed their guitars and ukuleles, and lithe young girls with gleaming brown bodies began their hulas. They swayed their grass skirts, their flower-bedecked wrists and ankles flowing gracefully, telling tales of wind and palm trees, of oceans and rainbows, of clouds and storms and spirits of departed chiefs.

Sherry watched Shag surreptitiously, and her pulse beat faster. His eyes were bright and eager as he gazed at the dancers, and his voice and laughter when he greeted old and new friends rang out clear and happy. He does belong here, Sherry told herself. Surely he will see. Oldtimers nodded at one another and whispered, "He's like his grandfather. He'll stay now."

Then the happiness in Sherry died. Diana Reed, beautiful in a bizarre dress of huge vividly printed flowers, was plainly bored. She sat close to Shag and observed the warm-hearted islanders with cold green eyes. She said loudly enough for Sherry to hear:

"Tomorrow I'm going to the hidden caves where the chiefs are buried with their treasures."

Shag shot a swift look at her. "But you can't go there, Diana. They're *tabu.*"

"That's childish," Diana said petulantly. "Tomorrow we'll go."

Shag's jaw went out. "It just isn't done, Diana," he said firmly. "We'll find some other entertainment."

Sherry saw Diana Reed's eyes narrow to cold green points, and she had an odd premonition that the New York girl would not let the matter drop that easily.

Diana Reed seemed to have forgotten it, for she put her hand in Shag's and said, "I'll take my hulas in New York, darling, minus all this elemental backdrop."

Shag did not seem to hear. His eyes, dark and eager, were again on the swaying, rhythmic brown dancers and his whole being seemed geared to the steady beat of the drums swelling through the early dusk.

Diana jumped up impatiently, just as a pale silver moon appeared above the dark feathery heads of the cocoanut palms. She beckoned to the crowd of New Yorkers, "Come, I'm dying for a real drink and a game of poker. Let's go in the house." She looked at Shag, "Coming?"

He stared at her, startled, then whispered, "But these people are old friends. You go ahead, dear. I'll join you later."

Sherry's heart leaped, then she remembered the softly spoken "dear," and sighed. He really must love her, she thought, his voice was so tender.

MORE and more in the days that followed, Sherry felt Diana Reed's veiled antagonism to the island life, and thought, Diana's clever enough not to show Shag too early. Not until she's landed him. She'll get him away from here in her own way, in her own time.

Sherry avoided being with the guests as much as possible. She made excuses whenever Shag insisted that she go with them on trips to far parts of the island. She could not stand seeing him with Diana Reed, watching how cleverly she managed him. "The hand of iron in a glove," *Keiki* had said.

But one day Diana Reed had a headache and Shag insisted that Sherry go horseback riding with him. "I'm leaving soon," he said, with the smile she could not resist. "Let's go up to that pit where you saved my life. Somehow I want to see it again with you."

Against her better judgment, and because she could not help herself, Sherry consented. When they were up on top of the old ridge they got off their horses and tied them to a tree, following an old trail down the slope. It took them a long time to discover the pit. Finally they located it, brush-covered and treacherous as it had been that other day.

Shag took one of Sherry's capable little hands in his, pressed it hard. She knew by the far away look in his eyes that it was an unconscious gesture on his part, but it sent lightning shafts of happiness tearing through her. It made her tremble and she slipped on the loose lava rock at their feet and fell against Shag's tall hard body.

His arms went around her to steady

her. His eyes looked down into hers, stayed there, because, shamelessly, she held them. For a long minute he stared at her as if he had not seen her before. Then shamelessly, too, Sherry held her lips up to his telling herself fiercely, *Diana's no good for you, Shag. She'll take you away and you belong here. You'll be unhappy anywhere else. Don't you see, Shag? Don't you see?*

He must have read some of her thoughts in her eyes, for his arms tightened around her trembling body and his lips came down on hers in a wild, sweet demanding kiss. For a second the whole mountainside rushed up to the blue heavens, carrying Sherry along with it, helplessly, gloriously.

Shag broke away suddenly and the golden moment was broken by his sharp, ragged voice, "Why, Cricket—Cricket, I didn't mean to do that. I shouldn't have. It was just that you're so darned sweet I forgot everything else for a second." Then in a rush, "I had no right. I'm engaged to Diana. We're to be married soon." He took Sherry's shoulders in his strong hands. "Gosh, Cricket, I'm sorry."

Sherry blinked back hot scalding tears. Blind, lovable Shag, she thought. Can't you see you won't be happy in New York? Don't you see Diana is restless and selfish? She'll make you unhappy.

Shag seemed to have withdrawn from Sherry, his eyes had such a remote look in them. Sherry shook herself, summoned her pride.

"Don't worry, Shag," she said. "It was just for old time's sake, I guess." She managed a lighter tone, "Let it go that way."

He smiled down at her, relieved. But his eyes held an odd, questioning look. "I'm glad. Well, if it didn't mean anything—" he faltered.

Blind pain stabbed Sherry. *Didn't mean anything.* It meant everything, but she must not let it show. She made herself laugh, a light, frivolous laugh. "Let's forget it ever happened," she said. "It really never did, you know."

Shag gazed up at the remote summit of *Haleakala,* and down to the green growth of jungle in the valleys. He drew in his breath sharply.

"Sometimes I almost wish I could stay here," he said heavily. "If Diana liked it, perhaps— But she's set her heart on my going into her father's business in New York. He's rather a fabulous figure. Steel, you know. I know this trip was a last try on my part to sell her the idea of living here." He frowned. "Guess it didn't work."

So you're going to imprison yourself in great steel walls and chromium and crystal offices and die inch by inch and not know it.

She said faintly, "You'd be happier here, Shag."

"Sometimes I think I would be," he said slowly, "and other times I'm not quite sure. You see, Mother hated it so. I'm torn between her hate of it and Father's love for it." He smiled wistfully, twisting Sherry's heart. "I don't remember Father or Grandfather, you know. Perhaps if I did things would be different. I guess it's a case of 'As the twig is bent, so the tree is inclined,' or something like that."

They rode back to the ranch in almost complete silence, each busy with his own thoughts. Once or twice, Sherry tried to break through Shag's reserve, but she was not very successful. The ache in her heart grew as they neared the house.

Then swiftly, suddenly, had come the attack on Pearl Harbor. Even the little island of Maui shook and reverberated with the shocking news. Men rushed to enlist. Home guards went into action. Life went on a war-time basis, with martial law and nightly blackouts.

Shag went to Honolulu to enlist in the Navy as a naval aviation cadet, and later he became an ace flyer. The rest of the crowd remained at the plantation until

they could be evacuated to the Mainland. Diana Reed stayed in Honolulu and took a war job. "To be near Shag when he returns," she told everyone.

Due to the lack of men at the plantation, Sherry took one of the bookkeepers' jobs to help *Keiki* with the business end of the plantation. That was the way things stood in the months Shag had been away.

Sherry's one thought in life was that Shag, after the long separation from Diana Reed, would see that his rightful place was at Lunar Bow. But now that they were back it seemed futile.

SHERRY shook herself as if to brush all those painful memories aside. No use crying for the moon when the moon was too far beyond her reach. Better to work and work and work. That was the way to ease the pain, the way to forget Shag.

She went back to the office and it was very late when she stole back into the great silent house. She stood at the French windows of her bedroom a long time watching the Lunar Bow arching across the blue-black sky. The ache in her heart seemed to fill her whole body.

Next morning she was up early, dressed and waiting on the *lanai* for Yat See to call her for breakfast. She was startled to see Diana Reed in white riding clothes, brandishing a riding crop in her slender hand, come out on the *lanai*. Sherry drew farther back into the big chair screened from Diana Reed's eyes by huge lacy ferns.

Liho, the Hawaiian stable boy, brought a prancing black mare around to the riding block.

Sherry could not help but hear the girl's arrogant command to the boy. "Get your horse. You are going to guide me to the caves where the dead chiefs are buried. I want to see the hidden treasures, the canoes filled with ancient spears and feather cloaks and helmets." She looked around cautiously, "Hurry before Mister Shag awakens. He'd try to stop me."

Sherry tensed. So Diana had not forgotten the caves!

Liho was shaking. "But they are *tabu*," he cried, his voice rising in fright. "*Tabu*."

"Nonsense," Diana Reed said hurriedly. "Do as you are told. Immediately! I don't intend to miss the only interesting thing in this whole place."

"No, no," the boy said, his voice going to a higher key. "*Tabu*. All bad things come when break *tabu*."

"Stupid boy!" Diana Reed was exasperated.

Sherry, leaning forward for a better view, stiffened in horror as she saw the other girl strike *Liho* smartly across the face with her riding crop.

He cried out in pain and hid his face in his hands. Sherry, blind with fury, started for Diana Reed. Then Shag's voice cut through the early morning quiet. Sherry stopped abruptly. He was the owner of Lunar Bow, it was up to him to handle the matter.

He said crisply, "What's the trouble, Diana?"

"The boy refuses to obey me," she said imperiously. "Tell him to do as I say."

And then Shag said, "Do as Miss Reed wishes, boy."

Sherry slipped away, tears blinding her eyes and pain choking her throat. Shag had not given the boy a chance to explain. He had taken Diana's word for the whole matter. Shag's father or grandfather would have been fair, and they would never have stood for anyone striking a servant. It was just as well that Shag was not staying in the islands. When news of this got about no one would want him.

Instinctively, Sherry knew that *Liho*, or any other Hawaiian, would never obey Diana Reed's command. He would rather die than break a *tabu* of that sort. That was why Sherry had not interfered.

She hurried to Yat See and made him promise to see about *Liho*. She watched

the Chinaman shuffle to the front of the house and knew that *Liho* would be all right in the old man's hands.

Then, without breakfast, she drove to the office. Her heart was too full to tell *Keiki* about what had happened at the plantation that morning. Later, when she could manage it less painfully, she would tell him.

All day she worked furiously and every time the thought of Shag entered her mind, she brushed it aside. Again she worked late at the office to avoid meeting Shag and Diana.

THE night was platinum and deep purple when Sherry crept quietly to the shadowed *lanai* of the big blacked-out house. She stood watching the tradewind sway the tall black crowns of the cocoanut trees. She drew her breath in sharply. The smell of ginger and night-blooming flowers permeated the whole place, and again a Lunar bow sliced the sky. Perhaps the plantation had been named because of the many moon bows around this part of the island.

Then she remembered the scene that morning with Diana Reed and *Liho* and stood for a long time leaning against a post, stifling the sobs that went through her. When she was quiet again, Shag's voice from the shadows behind her said quietly:

"I've been waiting a long time for you to come home, Cricket."

Sherry tried to speak but could not find her voice.

"Come here," Shag said gently. Reaching over, he took her hand and guided her down beside him on the couch.

Sherry still could not find her voice. She sat stiffly erect beside Shag.

He said, "You left too soon this morning, Cricket. I saw you go, but when I called you, you didn't hear."

"I—I heard enough," Sherry said in a muffled voice.

"You heard only part of it," he said softly. "After you left, *Liho* looked up at me and I saw the mark of the riding crop."

"Oh," Sherry said, "then you hadn't seen it before." She broke off breathlessly, relief pouring through her.

"Of course not," Shag said huskily. "I asked for explanations and when *Liho* told me, well—" He shrugged and looked off into space. "Diana left this afternoon." His face was grim in the moonlight. "She's never learned the meaning of *tabu*. Never will, probably."

He smiled quietly. "Funny how you can go along not seeing things, then suddenly you see everything in its right relation. Diana is alien to everything here. And I'm so much a part of it." He took a deep breath. "It hurts way down deep inside of me."

"Oh, Shag," Sherry said brokenly, "forgive me for thinking those things about you. I condemned you for the same thing I was guilty of. I didn't wait this morning. I didn't give you a fair chance."

"Forget it," he said, patting her hand.

Sherry went on in a choked voice, "I'm sorry about Diana. If you loved her—I mean, I—"

"You needn't be," he said softly. "I don't love her now. Perhaps I did at one time. I suppose I was flattered that anyone so glamorous and beautiful and rich would consent to marry me." He turned swiftly to Sherry, his eyes burning. "There's someone else. Someone I've loved for a long time, only I didn't know."

Sherry stiffened. Perhaps Shag had met some girl in Australia. She had heard that Australian girls were lovely.

"Someone I know?" she asked when she could find her voice.

Shag was looking at her oddly. "Someone you know very well," he said in a husky whisper. "Someone I'm going to know a lot better, if she's willing."

Suddenly his arms pulled her against him, hard. "Might as well find out right

now," he said, his lips just above hers, his eyes looking down into the moonlit depths of hers. "Okay?"

"Okay," she breathed against his lips, and soon the platinum and purple night swam about her in a blurred mist of happiness.

After a long time, Shag said, "We'll be married when the war is over, Cricket, darling. If you're willing."

She shook her head and he tensed. "You won't marry me?" he asked tightly.

She laughed softly. "I won't marry you then. I'll marry you now, before you go back."

"But, darling," he began.

She cut him off swiftly, "I want to be waiting for you when you come back. Here, Shag, at Lunar Bow." For a second she remembered that he might not come back, but she could not say that, she could not even think it. She laughed lightly, "Okay?"

"Of course, okay," he said. "That's what I wanted, but it seemed too much to ask." His eyes were grave. "I'll come back now," he said steadily. "To you and to Hawaii. You'll see."

"Yes, darling," she whispered. Her lips went quickly to his. Again he kissed her, and again purple and platinum mists swam about her, melting into the peaceful perfumed night and reaching up to the shining Moon Bow above them.

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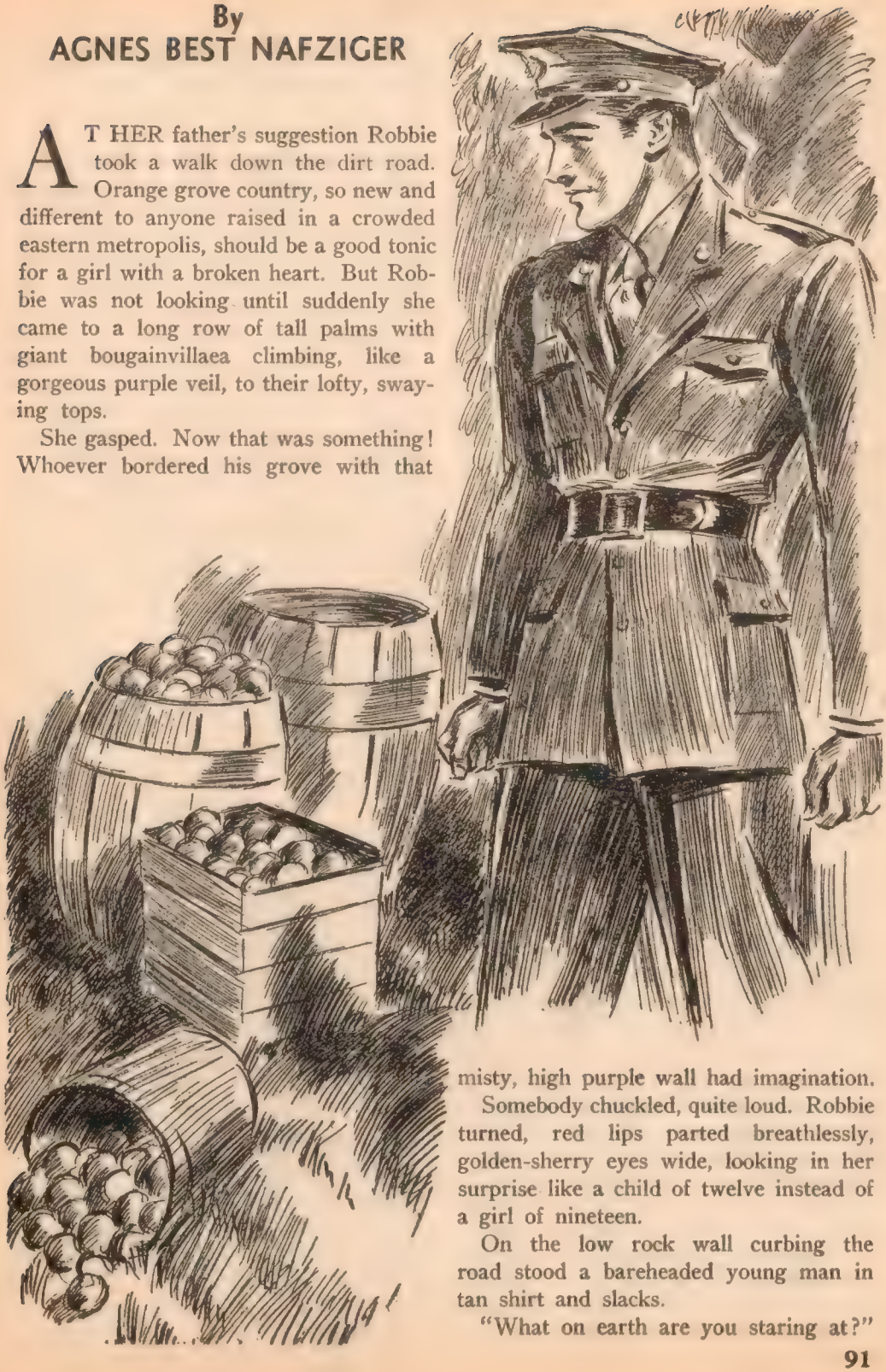
Dream Tomorrow

Bill didn't know he had a wife until he came home on furlough and found Robbie bossing his ranch.

"Red, Red," she whispered in horror. "Look at me. Tell me you're not hurt."

By
AGNES BEST NAFZIGER



AT HER father's suggestion Robbie took a walk down the dirt road. Orange grove country, so new and different to anyone raised in a crowded eastern metropolis, should be a good tonic for a girl with a broken heart. But Robbie was not looking until suddenly she came to a long row of tall palms with giant bougainvillaea climbing, like a gorgeous purple veil, to their lofty, swaying tops.

She gasped. Now that was something! Whoever bordered his grove with that misty, high purple wall had imagination.

Somebody chuckled, quite loud. Robbie turned, red lips parted breathlessly, golden-sherry eyes wide, looking in her surprise like a child of twelve instead of a girl of nineteen.

On the low rock wall curbing the road stood a bareheaded young man in tan shirt and slacks.

"What on earth are you staring at?"

he demanded, watching her intently.

"I wasn't staring," she denied coolly. "Of course it is quite interesting—the grove, I mean."

Jumping down from the wall, he grinned. His eyes were a clear bright blue in a sun-bronzed, lean-cheeked face. He was tall and rangy, almost ten inches taller than Robbie's five feet two. His face was not handsome in a conventional way. It was disturbing, with a gay bold charm that made Robbie's pulses race. Even though Robbie still had memories, and a badly dented heart.

"Wait till I smudge," he said. "That's when its real beauty comes out—in smoke."

"Smudge?" she repeated blankly. "I don't know a thing about groves. My father and sister and I just moved into that little yellow house back there. I'm Roberta Knight."

"And I'm Bill Kenilwright. I live right there." He pointed to the huge white frame house beside the grove. "In four rooms of it, that is. Which is all a poor lonely bachelor needs."

She flushed, for no reason at all. When Robbie flushed her small, delicate face took on a startling charm. Bill drew in his breath sharply.

"Let me show you the grove," he suggested, taking her arm.

That was how it started, in spite of Robbie's determination never to trust another man after the way Clay Penney had treated her. It started, too, in spite of the war.

Bill hated being home. He wanted to be in the thick of the fight, but his draft board convinced him he was more valuable where he was. And so, for a little while, they had each other.

It was down at the grove one day that Bill proposed. All about them was the enchanting sweetness of orange blossoms, drenching the air with their fragrance. A tingling awareness had flashed between them, as electric as lightning. Bill drew Robbie to him suddenly and said, "Let's get married, darling. Right away. I love you so."

Robbie gulped. "Bill," she whispered miserably. "I'd love to. But there's Dad and Mary. Dad hasn't walked since the auto accident that took Mother's life. I've got to take care of him until Mary graduates from high school. Then she'll get a job and help."

Bill was silent, his hold on her relaxing a little, and the thrill suddenly was gone. Robbie's heart fluttered, sank. She had hoped he would say, "Look, my house is big. We can all move in together, can't we? I don't want to wait for you any longer, Robbie."

But he did not. He started talking about something else, and an ugly little doubt crept into her heart. Bill was no different from Clay Penney. But she smothered the thought instantly. Bill could not be expected, in these times, to take on not only a wife but an invalid father-in-law and a giddy high school girl. Citrus growers always had a difficult job and now, with the scarcity of help, fruit growing was, indeed, a serious problem.

Robbie knew, too, that Bill's grove had not been profitable for some time. A few years before a bad freeze had taken most of his fruit and plunged him into debt. With a good season this year he would be all right, but another disaster might mean losing these trees his grandfather had planted almost fifty years ago.

"Not that that should matter, in these times," he had told her, scowling, staring at the purple bougainvillaea that distinguished his grove from its neighbors. "Or doesn't it? My home, the home I want to be yours, too, that's what we're fighting for, isn't it?"

"Yes, Bill." A light, mellow and soft as candle-glow, burned in Robbie's amber eyes. She put her hand on his arm gent-

ly, and he covered it swiftly with his. "The government considers citrus fruit an essential food. They ship huge quantities to our armed forces. You can't just run off and leave your grove."

"No," Bill muttered. "You're right. I know you're right."

But that did not mean he was happy about it. He seemed to resent every day spent in his routine work. When he held Robbie in his arms it was between them: his restlessness, his longing to get into the Army. It was that, she knew. Was he like Clay Penney, who liked to play with hearts and throw them away?

WHEN she came home that night her father was still sitting in his wheelchair by the window, the moonlight streaming over his thin, frail form.

"Dad," she blurted, "I'm quitting my job at the packing house, and taking a job in a defense plant somewhere."

Mr. Knight was silent a moment. He moved his wheel chair a few inches. "I wish you wouldn't, Robbie," he said quietly. "By commuting to an aircraft factory you'd be gone at least twelve hours a day."

Robbie looked at his thin face with its lines of suffering, and then she swallowed her disappointment. "I only want to do my part," she said.

"You are doing your part. Somebody must take care of the jobs here in our little village of Orlane, too. That's patriotism."

Robbie said no more. She knew it was to her he clung, not Mary. Mary had a hard young flippancy he did not understand, that could give him no comfort, in his loneliness and pain.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, came Mary's announcement: "I've quit school!"

"You can't," Robbie gasped. "You don't graduate until June."

"I found out I had enough credits at the half-term to graduate. And with the war on," Mary said pertly, "it's my patriotic duty to take a defense job, don't you think?"

Mr. Knight agreed, and while Mary departed jubilantly for the city to get her job, Robbie went for a walk in the cool dim aisles of Bill's grove. Bill was not there. He was attending a Citrus Growers' Association meeting in Los Angeles.

But he'll be home tonight. Mary will be, too, with her job, and Bill and I can be married!

It was a prayer. It was a shining hope, a radiant wish that her dream would come true.

When Mary came home, she was starry-eyed and breathless. "I got it!" she cried. "I'm working at Alton Aircraft. Yipee!"

Robbie did not say a word. She groped for a chair and sat down, her eyes shining softly.

"What are you crying about?" Mary demanded, staring at her. "Aren't you glad I got the job?"

"I'm not crying," Robbie denied hotly, dashing the tears from her cheeks and running into the kitchen to start supper. As soon as supper was over Bill would be home and she could tell him.

She broke two plates while she washed the dishes. They simply slipped through her trembling fingers to the floor.

"What in the world is the matter?" Mary came from the living room, where she was telling her father all over again about the new job. "Just because I have a pay check coming you don't need to think I'm going to buy a new set of dishes!"

The starry radiance in Robbie's eyes only brightened. Grabbing a sweater, she ran out of the house, stopping only to give her father a quick kiss. She raced through the twilight lanes of the grove next door. Bill's grove.

Mary had a job! The words sang. "Bill, Bill," she whispered softly, and

stopped short. She must control herself. Then she saw his tall rangy figure running toward her. He was so anxious to look at her, kiss her again, after a whole three days' absence.

He caught her to him, held her close. Robbie clung to him with little laughs that were half sobs.

"What is wrong?" he said, lifting her head and staring at her. "Honey, you've been working too hard, working all day and sitting up half the night with your father." He shook her gently, his eyes alarmed. "Why can't that sister of yours do something for a change?"

"Oh, Bill, she has! That's what I want to tell you! Mary quit school and got a swell job at Alton's. Enough pay to take care of both her and Father!"

"Oh." Bill was very still after that one word. He seemed not even to be breathing. There was a cool breeze blowing down from the snowy range behind the foothills. But that was not the reason Robbie suddenly shivered. Bill's arms were still about her, but somehow the feeling had left them.

"Mary's thrilled to death," she went on. A trembling coldness spread inside her as Bill's arms dropped and he took a step from her. It was as if not Bill, but Clay Penney, stood by her, his face casual as he explained flippantly, "I'm leaving, Robbie, moving to Frisco. It's been swell knowing you."

She pulled herself together. "Did you have a good time in the city?" she asked.

"Got a lot done, and a lot to worry about," he replied. "Found a caretaker for the place."

"A caretaker?"

"I've enlisted, Robbie." His clear, steady eyes met hers. "I couldn't wait any longer. I'm young and strong, no dependents."

Clouds scudded across the low sun. No dependents. Because they were not married, she was no dependent although all her happiness depended on him. Bill was saying something but she did not hear. Another dream was gone.

"Of course," she said, numbly. "Of course you should enlist, Bill."

"It's the way a man feels, Robbie. I've been dreaming about you and me. But there's this job first."

"Yes," Robbie whispered. "Yes. I know." She turned toward home, and they walked on, not talking. They entered the little house where her father sat in the twilight. She heard them dimly, her father and Bill, talking about his enlistment and the caretaker he had hired, Mike Grenady.

"He knew my father," Bill explained. "And he knows trees. The grove will be safe with him."

"I heard he goes on a drinking spree occasionally," Mr. Knight said.

"Not when he's working. Mike is lonesome and eccentric, that's the way old bachelors get." He gave Robbie a twinkling look, but she did not meet his glance. She was staring out of the window. Her face was rigid and white.

Mr. Knight said something teasing about how handsome Bill would look in his uniform, and Robbie heard his pleased, shy laugh. Her throat tightened. Bill would have a uniform, and Mary would have her job and a big pay-check, but Robbie would stay here to work in the packing house all day long and to come home nights to a lonely, sick father.

MARY came breezing in. Her cheeks were happily flushed, and her golden hair was flying loose, as usual. She patted Bill's cheek.

"Did you hear about me, Bill? Just wait till Robbie sees my pay-check!"

For one blinding hot moment Robbie resented her sister. Her breath piled up in her throat; her slim young body was rigid. But Mary did not notice. She ran out of the house, singing as she went.

Bill rose to go, and Robbie walked outside with him. He put his arm about her, drawing her to him, but she could not relax. Tomorrow she would feel all right about this. But not tonight. Tomorrow she would send him on his way with her blessing. But tonight she could not forgive him for being Clay Penney all over again. For not loving her enough to be reckless about their love. There were soldiers who married their girls even when it was not practical.

"What's the matter, Robbie? Are you angry because I enlisted?" he said. "Surely you understand how I've been wanting to."

"Yes, I understand," came a strange bitter voice from Robbie's lips. Or rather from that dark deep pool in Robbie's heart where distrust and fear lay. "I understand that you must have a uniform in order to serve your country or a big pay-check like Mary's. Taking care of your grove, raising a good crop of oranges to feed our people and our soldiers—you wouldn't get enough credit for that."

"You can't know what you're saying!" Bill broke in hotly. "In the first place, I have nothing to say about it. I'm 1-A. In the second place, if you think any red-blooded young fellow can be satisfied anywhere but right in the thick of it— Oh, let's not quarrel. Not you and I, with so little time left. If my affairs were in better shape I'd like to get married, Robbie. But I'm up to my ears in debt, hanging onto the grove by the skin of my teeth."

The way he said it was unfortunate. It brought a red tide of humiliation into her face. Did he think she was begging him to marry her? Burning stars danced before her eyes. Rage choked her. "I wouldn't be interested in that," she heard her voice say coldly. "Why in the world I should take on a soldier husband, leaving behind him a mountain of debts—"

Even as the words left her lips she was horrified. But she could not stop them. She saw the look on his face become stricken, appalled. She tried to speak, to say humbly, "Bill, I didn't mean—" But she couldn't.

He had a crooked smile on his lips. "Okay, Robbie. My mistake." He went off then, into the dark grove.

She found herself walking on the dirt road with the deep, mysterious groves on either side, tall palms swaying slightly. The moon came up, and the shadows were unsmiling phantoms. Everything was so quiet. Not the rustle of a leaf disturbed the night. Across the sky sped the white finger of a searchlight, then two and three, finding a plane up there somewhere. Far off in the distance was faint thunder.

Robbie stood taut and listened. Bill was not in that one, speeding across the sky. But soon he would be, heading out for the sea.

She turned sharply and ran—ran breathlessly, fiercely, wildly, until she dropped exhausted beside the rock wall around his grove. How long she was huddled there, numb with her agony, she never knew. She scarcely remembered finding her way, finally, to the dark house and groping into bed.

IN the days that followed every sound, every footstep, roused a feverish hope. Bill! But Bill did not come. He was through with her, and no wonder. She writhed, hearing her own bitter, insane words over and over. How weak and stupid she had been, letting that childish affair with Clay darken Bill's fine, beautiful love. She knew that he had been sincere. Knew it when it was too late.

She had heard that he was leaving on Monday. When Monday had come and gone, she would be glad. Anything would be better than waiting.

A long, endless Sunday dragged by. Robbie read to her father, listened with him to his favorite radio programs, smoked one cigarette after the other, feverishly.

Then, suddenly, she sensed his coming, before she heard him, long before she saw him, his long legs running through the grove in the same old way. It was night. The moon gleamed on his bronze hair. He loomed up out of the trees like a tall young god, straight and radiant.

"I wanted to tell you good-by," he said, walking through the doorway and giving his hand to Mr. Knight. "I'm leaving at seven in the morning."

Robbie heard her father's good wishes. Then Bill turned to her. She smiled up at him, and held out her hand. For a long moment he stared down into her white, mask-like face.

"Good-by, Robbie," he said. "The war will be over soon. With a few million like me out there we can't help but finish it quickly. So don't get too used to not having me around."

"I won't," she promised, through rigidly smiling lips.

He pressed her hand and was gone. Robbie stood in the doorway, staring at the grove that had swallowed him in cave-like darkness. The palms swayed gently, silhouetted against a moon-blue sky.

Letters came from him. Brief, impersonal, meaning nothing at all except that he was very happy, crazy about his new life, loving every bit of it. They were everything to Robbie, those letters. And yet they were nothing.

A few weeks later as Robbie took her father for his usual ride in his wheel-chair he suggested stopping in at Bill's house to see Mike Grenady, the caretaker.

"I don't think he's working very hard," Mr. Knight said.

Mike was smoking his pipe on the porch. He gave Robbie no greeting at all, but spoke affably enough to her father.

"There's no use trying to keep up the grove," he observed, waving his pipe. "Tried to get a sprayer last week, but there aren't enough spray men to go around. Lost an awful lot of good oranges that fell in that rain storm Sunday. Nobody to pick them up. Shame, too. Those oranges laying there just remind me of gold dollars laying around."

"If they were, you'd work pretty hard picking them up," Robbie murmured under her breath.

"Afraid Bill's losing his trees this year anyway, and it don't make much difference, with him where he is. Chances are he won't be back for years, if at all, and then he won't be satisfied to sit down in one of these dark old groves after the excitement he's seen."

"Bill thinks a lot of this grove," Mr. Knight said. "It's his home; it's been his father's and grandfather's. It seems unpatriotic if we can't keep his home for him, while he's off fighting to protect it. Seems to me that's our job, keeping the homes for those who are gone."

"Yeah," Mike growled. "But this is the government's fault. It's taking the men that should be here at home tending to these groves. How am I going to get this fruit picked? The Association used to provide pickers for the growers, but they can't get them now. Well, if they can't, how the dickens can I?"

"I understand the high schools are providing student pickers."

Mike swore fluently. What he thought of student pickers could not be repeated. They had tried using them in that big lemon grove the other side of the highway, and had nothing but trouble—fights, the students falling out of trees, handling the fruit carelessly, ruining it.

"But if it was put up to them," mused the man in the wheel-chair, "that they're picking oranges and lemons for the soldiers, not for a grove owner with his big grove and nice house—"

"Let the government handle it," Mike growled. "It's too much for me."

There were two bright scarlet spots in Robbie's cheeks, and her eyes flashed lightning. "Shall we go, Father?" she

said shortly, and pushed the wheel-chair so fast that her father held his breath. "That man! He ought to be put in a fox hole on Guadalcanal this minute! It's people like him—" Robbie choked.

"We better write Bill that Mike isn't doing so well," Mr. Knight said. "But it's a shame to worry him," he added anxiously.

Robbie was silent. Then, "No, don't worry Bill. I have a better idea. I'm not going to tell you about it, but I think it will work." Her voice shook with sudden excitement.

"Mike won't take orders from you, if that's what you're thinking of," Mr. Knight said skeptically.

"No. I know he won't," Robbie said blithely. Mike would not take orders from Roberta Collins. But from Mrs. Kenilwright? He would, and like it!

Of course the only flaw with that plan was that there was no Mrs. Bill Kenilwright. Unless—

SHE almost lost her courage before the next night, when she returned, alone, to Mike Grenady, smoking his pipe on the porch. As she came up he quickly stuffed some empty beer bottles behind the hedge and glared at her with a black scowl.

"Look, Mike, we have to do something about getting this fruit picked," she began abruptly.

"We?" repeated Mike. "What have you got to say about it? What are you butting in for anyway? This isn't your grove."

"But it is—half mine, anyway," she said calmly. "We weren't going to tell anyone—it mustn't get out, but Bill and I are married. So you see, I'm interested in this grove."

"Huh." He stared at her. "What's it a secret for? You only hide something you're ashamed about."

"It's my father," Robbie explained. "I can't leave him, and he'd feel terrible if he thought he was in the way. But with Bill enlisting, don't you understand? I wanted to be Bill's wife no matter what happened."

That, at least, was the truth. Tears stood in her eyes.

Mike dug in the bowl of his pipe with his knife, then filled it with tobacco, lit it and puffed half a dozen times before he spoke. "Huh," he grunted grudgingly. "Well, you see what you can do with these damned trees! I'm sick of them."

Robbie almost kissed him. "Together we'll work it out. We'll keep Bill's grove the best in the country."

She fell asleep with a smile on her face that night, and peace in her heart. She was doing something for Bill. She was doing something for her country.

She made arrangements to have a group of boys from the high school pick the fruit. Mike went after them in the truck. By the time they reached the grove, he had made four of them so angry by giving them gruff, unkind orders, that they told Robbie they were quitting.

Robbie, looking like a slim young boy herself in blue shirt and jeans except for her pale soft hair, gave the boys a gay, radiant smile. "That's your privilege of course," she said blithely. "In America we are free to work, not forced to. But this is a patriotic job, and no good American will refuse to do a patriotic job now. Of course," she added, "we'd all like to be overseas, soldiers in uniform, but working here in this grove, we're soldiers, too."

"Aw, hire a hall!" shouted a pug-nosed redhead.

Robbie glared at him. You little demon! she thought. Pug-nosed and red-headed. Bill must have looked just like that once. The boy next to him landed a fist on his jaw, and then legs and arms were flying in a wild circle as the whole crew scrambled. Robbie stood to one side, helpless, yelling at them to quit. Then one of the

boys, the redhead, seemed to hoist himself out of the melee by sheer strength, and bawled, "Now get to work, you Huns!"

The fight was over. In orderly lines the crew got their bags and clippers and set to work. Robbie and Mike were busy every minute, working themselves, as well as teaching the boys to handle the delicate fruit carefully, to empty the filled bags gently. And box after box was piled high with the golden fruit.

AT THE end of each day Robbie stumbled homeward wearily. Her bones ached until they burned. Her shoulders, after being weighed down all day by the heavy canvas bags felt permanently dislocated. But never had the tall palms, covered with the purple bougainvillaea, silhouetted against a clear twilight sky, been so beautiful. Through the tired scalding pain ran a deep thrill: it was her country. And her soldier.

One by one the big trees were cleared of their yellow burden, until at last only a few hours' work remained. Robbie thought of her little crew with fondness. New boys had come in almost every day, as others quit. But the redhead with the pug nose had stayed.

He was the one who threw oranges at the others every chance he got. He was the one who forced a brawny, tough-skinned fellow five years older than himself, to his knees to apologize to Robbie. And though he seemed to spend most of his time singing in the tree tops or thinking up some devilment, he was easily the champion picker of them all.

And no accidents, Robbie thought happily the last day, perched at the top of a ladder clipping oranges. The thought had barely crossed her mind when there was a crash and a scream. On the moist, grassy earth below lay the still form of young Red. He had fallen from the top of the tree.

It was a long moment before Robbie could move. Her flesh congealed with horror, her bones clamping, paralyzing her. Somebody screamed, then she was stumbling, jumping, sliding down the ladder, her hair torn by branches, her face slapped and scratched. She was on her knees beside him.

"Red, Red," she whispered in horror. "Look at me. Tell me you're not hurt!"

He lay so still. The freckles stood out like little raised dots on his grayish-white face. His mischievous, dancing eyes were closed.

"Don't touch him," ordered a cool quiet voice. "We'll bring the doctor right here, so we don't need to move him. It may be his back, and moving him would be dangerous."

She looked up, eyes staring blankly, disbelievingly. Her tangled, disarranged hair fell across her eyes. She pushed it aside. Her lips formed a soundless, breathless word: "Bill!"

"Get up, Robbie," he was saying kindly. "The boy will be all right. You run to the house and see that the boy I sent really called the doctor."

As a person in a dream, she ran. Bill! And it was not until then that she thought, He's wonderful in his uniform.

RED was resting in the big living room of the Kenilwright house, and the color was back in his cheeks. The doctor had not found any broken bones. "Just had the wind knocked out of him," he said.

Tears ran down Robbie's cheeks. "Oh, I'm so glad. These boys have been grand about working. I couldn't stand to have anything happen to them." Mike, standing next to her, patted her shoulder. She looked at him through wet lashes. "You too, Mike. You've been swell."

Mike grinned. "I have to hand it to Bill. He picked a good wife," he said. "I never thought we'd get this fruit picked, leastways not so the packing house could

use it. I never did go for this wife business, but Bill picked a good one."

Robbie stood frozen. The doctor, who had been in Orlane when Bill was born, stared in astonishment. "You slick one, you! Why didn't you tell your friends? Introduce us to the bride!"

"Please," Robbie begged, her eyes fixed on Bill's face. "Bill—this is such a surprise!"

"Surprise is right," grinned Bill. "Run away, Mike and Doc, I want to talk with my wife, can't you see?"

"Bill," she whispered, her hands trying to cover her burning face. "Mike wouldn't work, so I told him—"

Gently Bill took her hands from her face. "Look at me, you little fool," he said. For one moment their eyes met. Then he drew her to him, straining her close until no breath was left. Finding her forehead, her eyes, her cheeks, her mouth, with his lips. Above the earth that existed no more, a red flame burned, a thousand stars sang. Through time that had no meaning, years swung and eternity came deep and rich with their love.

"Please, Bill," she gasped finally. "Mike and the doctor will be back—"

"So what?" Bill demanded. "They think we're married, and soon as we can get the license we will be. Look, honey, I don't need to tell you what you've done here for me. I've been worried sick about the grove. I finally got this chance to come home and look after it. And I find that a little girl I'd been thinking didn't—well, didn't see things my way anymore—has done a man's job by sheer grit."

"No, not grit," whispered Robbie. "Just loving you, Bill."

He held her to him again, and his voice was husky. "Sweet darling. I've got two weeks, Robbie. That will be all, for maybe a long time."

"I know." She clung to him. She could feel the beating of his heart. She knew that in many lonely nights to come she would give life itself to be able to feel him close, as she felt him now. And yet somehow the dream was real; as real as his lips on hers.

Happiness winged through her with a radiant sweep. "I know, Bill. But we won't be apart, not ever again. Not even with oceans and continents between us. While you're gone I'll be busy taking care of our home. I think I've got a wonderful job," she finished, eyes shining, a tremulous smile on her lips.

"I think I've got a wonderful wife," Bill said tenderly.

THAT MORE AND BIGGER AERIAL BLOWS MAY BE STRUCK AT OUR ENEMIES — BUY MORE

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Best Smile Forward

By DONNA GEYER

Should a man who is deferred let his rival in uniform have all the breaks with the girl they both love?

Randy kissed Jean—briefly. It was more final than a thousand good-bys.

IT DIDN'T seem possible that Jean Bryan could carry the torch for Randy Nicholls for three years, and then, only three short weeks after he came back to her, call him a fool and an insufferable idiot, and mean it. But it happened.

That summer three years ago it had been Jean and Randy exclusively. They danced and swam. They planned skiing and toboganning, and more dancing for the winter months. Then came the late summer night that Randy telephoned early to ask if Jean minded missing the country club dance. He wanted to talk to her.

Jean was glad she had the new dress she had bought for the dance. She made herself as beautiful as she knew how, smoothing the black wing of her hair, and spraying a faint scent onto it. The dress

was a film of white net caught into a tight emerald bodice. The green and white were echoed by Randy's gardenia in her hair.

She could hardly bear to wait for him. She turned out her bedroom light and stood at the window anxious for that first glimpse of his long figure striding up the moon-washed path to the house.

When he came they walked out into the garden and sat on the stone bench before the mammoth cottonwood. The breeze brushed her cheek softly and Jean watched Randy as he sat there at her side, his hands clasped about one knee.

But when he spoke, his words wiped out her awareness of the night and the breeze, and she could see only the proud determination on his face, his unhappiness.

"Jeanie," Randy said, "my family is in trouble. Father told us tonight that his money is gone. Every cent of it. He'll have to sell our house, our cars, anything that will help pay off our debts."

"Oh, Randy!" They were the only words that came to her.

"I've got to look after Mother and Father now," Randy said. He looked at her for a long moment, and then he stood up, pulling her to her feet.

"This is good-by, Jeanie."

"Good-by! But why, Randy? What difference can it make to us?"

"I'm going East to take a job I've been offered. It might be a long time before I can come back."

She wanted to slip her arms around his neck and plead. She wanted to say, Let me help, Randy, darling. I'm not afraid of being poor. I could cook and sew, and make you happy. I'm not afraid of anything, as long as I'm with you.

But she couldn't say those things. Randy was proud, too proud. Instead she said, very soberly, "Your money will never make any difference to me, Randy."

"I know, Jeanie. But it seems it does to me. I've got to do this thing alone."

He put his arms around her then, and kissed her—briefly. But it was more final than a thousand good-bys.

"Keep your fingers crossed for me, Jeanie," he had said. "I'll let you know when I'm vice president of the company." Then he was gone.

"I'll let you know when I'm vice president of the company." But he never had. And it was the only hope he had left her.

He didn't even write. Everyone had asked her if she heard from Randy, and she had said, "Not lately." Somehow she couldn't say "not at all."

Finally she began to date again, because she knew she should. There was no use living on memories of the past when Randy did not intend to include her in his future.

WHEN the war caught the United States in its hideous maelstrom Jean took a job at the munitions plant. Her three-shift schedule upset the big house on the hill where her mother and father lived, and so she moved into an apartment with Isabelle Travers, who worked with her, and who had married Skip just before he left for active duty in the Pacific.

"The one remaining surplus commodity, that's what we are," Izzy had laughed. "Girls."

By and by the ache of saying good-by to the men she knew turned into a sort of fright that life was going to slip by. So when Gerard King started to hound the apartment, Jean had about made up her mind to say "Yes" if he asked her. Because Gerry was going now, too. He had felt the draft getting closer, so he had enlisted in the hopes of a commission.

That was where things were when Randy came back. Jean was working in her cubicle where she mixed explosive powder, her hands under the glass partition before her, when she looked up and there he was, a worker's badge blinking on his tan gabardine shirt. Her hands froze in their

motion, and she just stared at him.

"Randy!"

Randy grinned the same old grin that had always made her heart turn over.

"Still trying to improve yourself with a little powder, I see, Jeanie."

"At least I never expected to see you in a powder room," she countered weakly. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm one of the boys," Randy said.

"But your job at the academy—"

"I wasn't thrown out," Randy soothed. "Have dinner with me tonight and I'll tell you all about it. I take it they still dance at the Cosmo?"

"They do, and I will," Jean said warmly.

It was a good thing he walked away then, for Jean began to realize what had happened, and it made her hands shake so she had to stop work for a moment. Randy had come back!

She looked down at herself with dismay. Company coveralls topped off with goggles, a bandana, and asbestos wristlets!

Her mind raced ahead to the end of the shift. She would hurry home and make herself as lovely as she could. There was a dress in her closet—a film of green and white—that had whispered Randy's name each time in three years that she had disturbed it.

Izzy had already gone out to dinner when Randy came, so they left at once. Nothing seemed changed, even afterward when they danced at the Cosmo, for Randy held her close, and his blue eyes still dizzied her when she caught his full glance.

It was late when they drove to the big house on the hill, but her mother and father were still up, and very glad to see Randy.

Before they went they walked as if drawn by a magnet to the stone bench in the garden. Jean had on a light wrap against the chill evening wind, and the trees were leafless etchings above them.

"It seems odd to come back and find everything the same, after I've changed so much." Until Randy spoke Jean could almost believe it had been just last night—that other date.

"Have you changed, Randy?"

"Some ways yes, some ways no."

And me, Randy, what do you think about me? Do you love me any more? But she didn't let those words escape her lips, and Randy went on, not noticing her silence.

"I thought you would have married, and forgotten, Jeanie."

"No, I haven't married," Jean answered slowly.

Randy's next words were deep and careful. "I wanted to write. But I knew I mustn't. They paid me a good salary but it had to go a long way. There were lots of old debts."

I wrote to you, Jean thought. Dozens of letters—and threw them all away.

"I thought about you all the time." Randy was watching her face. "But I wanted you to be free to go on—without me."

"What brought you back, Randy?"

"The war," Randy answered briefly. "After Pearl Harbor I tried to enlist in the Navy. I was practically in when some fifth assistant to somebody's secretary noticed on the questionnaire that I'd had rheumatic fever when I was a child. They fired the papers back. When I tried the Army they asked if I'd ever been turned down by any branch of the service and that was that. The Coast Guard and the draft board turned me down, too, although I've always thought the academy pulled a few strings with the board."

"You wanted to go very badly," Jean murmured.

"Every man wants to fight for his country," Randy said quietly. "I was pretty bitter. Every night when I went home, I'd ask myself what I was doing to further the war effort. And I had to an-

swer that I didn't even collect old tin cans. We began to hear word of old students—'Cited for action' . . . 'Missing in action' . . . 'Killed'. . . . "

He leaned forward, his face brooding. "I coached basketball on the side, and the boys would look at my grand-piano mover's muscles and wonder. I didn't blame them. But I couldn't say, 'Look, kiddies. Grandpa is 4F. Now lay off me, will you?' Within a few months they'd be gone, too. Finally I quit and came out to make shells. I hate drawing a fat salary for helping, while those grand lads stand the gaff, but at least I've stopped asking myself sixty-four dollar questions at night."

"I'm sorry, Randy. But I'm glad you're home."

"So am I! Come on, Jeanie. Let's push along and have a drink."

JEAN laughed with sheer happiness as he hurried her to his car. Randy was home! When he kissed her good night in front of the apartment, she felt a little as Cinderella must have felt when the Prince found the glass slipper fit her tiny foot. Randy was home! Randy hadn't forgotten!

He was waiting that next night when the shift changed.

"Coke?" he asked, his eyes smiling down into her own.

Jean nodded.

Arm in arm they went to the cafeteria and ordered. But Jean had barely taken her first sip when she heard Izzy calling.

"Jean Bryan! I've been looking all over for you, and here you are—loafing. You can't keep the Navy waiting like this!"

"Izzy! You shouldn't have bothered!"

"And be late for your last date with Gerry? Not with me for your social secretary, you won't." Izzy grinned at them both.

Randy flushed. "Well, I certainly can't be responsible for disappointing the Navy. Drink your coke, Jeanie, and go." But his eyes and his voice were grimmer than his words.

Jean's eyes pleaded with him to understand. "It's Gerry King. He has his ensign's commission, and he leaves tomorrow."

"I'm glad for him," Randy said quietly. "Wish him luck for me."

After they were outside, Izzy turned to Jean. "Did I interrupt something?"

"Oh, no," Jean assured her grandly. "I could have kicked you in the shins."

"But I thought you had decided to be a Navy wife."

"It's always been Randy, Izzy. I might have fooled myself for awhile—but not after seeing him again."

Izzy squeezed her arm. "I hope I didn't spoil things, barging in like that about Gerry."

"Of course you didn't," Jean assured her. But she couldn't reassure herself as easily. Randy looked so strange when she left. She knew Izzy's careless words had hurt him.

She wore a simple soft gray wool dress for her date with Gerry. When she came in carrying her white turban and gloves, Gerard stood up.

"Marvelous, isn't she, Izzy? I couldn't bear monotony in my women."

There had been very little monotony in his life, as Jean well knew. She wasn't the first girl he had rushed.

"Want to go to Gerry's with us, Izzy, to see his uniforms?"

Isabelle shooed them out as she answered, "I should go along on your last evening together! Off with you!"

Lights streamed from every window of the King mansion. Mrs. King met them and put an arm around Jean's waist. "Here you are, you queer child, working day and night in that plant when you might be leading a normal life."

"Gerry's going to appreciate those bul-

lets one of these days," Jean answered, and immediately wished she hadn't, for Mrs. King looked so white. This was going to be hard for her. She had always dominated Gerry so.

"Put on your dress uniform first, son," Mrs. King said with a little smile. "It's all white and perfectly beautiful!" As soon as Gerry went upstairs she turned to Jean. "Do you suppose his commander would mind if I sent some fruit juice out so he could have a glass every night? I've had one at his bedside since he was a little tot."

Jean suppressed a smile. "I fancy the commander is much too busy for that, Mrs. King. He would think that Gerry was spoiled."

Mrs. King bridled. "I've never spoiled Gerry. I can't see that a glass of fruit juice. . . ."

But at that moment Gerry started down the stairs, and his mother's face lit with pride. "Isn't he handsome?"

Gerry smiled a little self-consciously, and in that moment Jean realized that this commission had saved him. It had taken a war, no less, to pry him out of his mother's stifling care.

After they had seen everything, Mrs. King turned to Jean. "Our relatives are coming in later, but I wanted a private showing for us first, my dear."

"I'll have to run, then," Jean said with some relief. "I have to get my sleep, so if I go now, I won't break up the party."

OUTSIDE Gerry put his arm around her. "We don't have to hurry, relatives or no relatives."

Jean shook her head. "No, she needs you with her tonight. Drive me back to the apartment and we'll have a drink to your luck."

Gerry didn't make any objection.

Izzy was busy at her endless knitting when they went in.

"How was the finery?"

Jean threw her coat back and relaxed into a chair. "He's perfectly beautiful, aren't you, Ensign King?"

"The tailor really did his stuff," Gerry admitted. "All I need is a good snappy salute, and I'm all set."

"No more to it than that?" Izzy asked dryly.

Jean plunged in before they could start one of their arguments. "We came up so we could all have a drink to his good luck."

"Sit right where you are!" Izzy rolled up her knitting and jumped to her feet. "I'll be back in a flash!"

They could hear her out in the kitchenette, opening and shutting the ice-box and the drawers and cupboards.

Gerry took Jean's hand and pulled her over onto the couch beside him. Jean felt a moment's panic.

"Life begins at twenty-eight," he said quietly. He gazed straight ahead. "I might even get a nice, safe shore job."

A terrific crash at the kitchen door made them both jump to their feet. Izzy stood there, her face white, her eyes scornfully fixed on Gerry. Broken glass and ice made a little pool around the coke bottles.

"Izzy!" Jean exclaimed. Then more gently, "Izzy, you've had a hard day. You'd better take an aspirin or something." She took the tray from Izzy and pushed her toward the bedroom.

"Yes. Yes, I guess I should," Izzy said listlessly.

After Izzy shut the door, Jean went to work putting the glass and ice on the tray, and mopping up. Gerry stood there smoking, his face puzzled.

"Don't mind Izzy," Jean said gently. "She hasn't heard from Skip for almost a month."

"There *are* nice soft, shore jobs," Gerry said, almost to himself. "I might just as well have one as the next fellow."

Personally, I can't imagine what use you would be on a ship, Jean thought irritably. But aloud she said only, "Here, take the

things that didn't break. We'll start over."

Back in the living room, Gerry watched Jean as she sipped. "I don't imagine I'll meet many girls more beautiful than you, Jean."

"Well, you can always hope," she answered politely.

Gerry touched her glass lightly, drained the rest of his, and then stood up. "This is it, Jean. I've got to get back." He stood there before her, his hands on her shoulders. "Maybe when I get back—" he said falteringly. "Maybe we'll go on from here."

It was a brush-off, but a well-meaning one.

"I'll write if you like, Gerry."

Gerry nodded. And as Jean kissed him good-by, she felt more real affection for him than she ever had. He hadn't wanted to be engaged any more than she had. For he knew, too, that the life he would carve for himself was all new—and all ahead.

THE next day Jean was constantly on the alert for Randy to pass her cubicle. When he hadn't by evening, she knew something was wrong. He must be ill! She would phone and inquire after she got home from work.

His mother answered the telephone, and Jean could hear the pleased surprise in her voice. They had always been good friends.

"I called to see if Randy was sick, Mrs. Nicholls. I missed him today."

"Sick?" Mrs. Nicholl's laugh was charming. "Oh, my no. He's standing right here, looking disgustingly healthy for a 4F as he would say. I'll let you talk to him."

But . . . if Randy was all right . . . Her hand trembled as she heard the stir at the other end of the line. What would she say?

"Jean?"

"Did you play hookey, Randy? I thought you must be sick." Thank goodness her voice didn't tremble.

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"No, I don't go back until midnight. I found a fellow on the graveyard shift who agreed to change with me." His voice was aloof.

"Oh. I see." Randy had changed shifts in the middle of the week, and he had wanted to!

"Well, I'll be seeing you," Jean said, her words more forlorn than flippant. "At one minute of the hour you gallop out, and a minute later I gallop in. I'll neigh to you as I pass."

Randy laughed, and Jean hung up, her eyes smarting with tears.

Izzy looked up. "Dreat big tears! What's the trouble?"

Jean blinked the tears away. "I just got the brush-off. With a baseball bat."

Izzy said, "Randy can't do this to us. Or can he?"

"He changed to the graveyard shift this week so he wouldn't have to see me any more," Jean's voice quavered.

"Maybe," Izzy reflected doubtfully, "it was for political reasons or something."

"And maybe I'm being sacrificed on his nobility again. First he won't write because he's in debt, then because he isn't in uniform and Gerry is, and he won't take advantage of Gerry's absence."

Izzy frowned. "How did you come out with Gerry the other night after I broke the ice?"

"I got the brush-off from him, too, but lightly. Like a butterfly's wing. He hopes to meet lots of girls more beautiful than I."

"More power to him—and his soft shore jobs."

Jean smiled ruefully. "I'm not doing so well, am I? First Gerry and now Randy."

Izzy put a reassuring arm around her shoulder. "You'll never miss Gerry, so why worry about it?"

She wasn't worrying about it, at least not about Gerry. But would she ever be able to forget Randy, to care again for someone else?

The next week was an eternity with leaden weights for days. Jean never raised her eyes from her work, so she didn't see Randy. How could she face him? Her eyes might say something that she was determined not to let him know. She liked the swing shift least of the three shifts anyway. Four to midnight successfully blanketed most of the fun you might have —if you felt like having fun.

On Monday morning of their week on the graveyard shift, the door-bell rang about eleven. Jean sprang out of bed, but Izzy made the door first. It was the mailman.

"I have six letters here marked 'Free' for Mrs. George Travers." He held them off tantalizingly. "Now that wouldn't be what you've been waiting for, would it?"

Izzy made a grab for them. Jean and the postman watched her tear open the first, and glance at the end. "They are! They're from Skip. You're a darling!" She kissed them both, and then fled back into the apartment.

"That fellow ought to write oftener." The mailman grinned.

Izzy's letters looked like cross-word puzzles, so many words had been snipped out. "But they left in that he loves me! Oh, Jean, isn't it wonderful?"

"You'd better open one a day. String them out," Jean suggested laughingly.

"Better than that," Izzy said dreamily. "I'm going to read all six of them six times a day for six weeks!"

"I'll bet you will at that," Jean laughed. But she didn't feel like laughing. There was almost a sob in her throat. It was wonderful to be in love as Skip and Izzy were. So much in love that you knew your love was returned—even across thousands of miles.

She was going to have to get hold of herself. What made her think Randy might love her? He never called or made any attempt to see her. Maybe she was just kidding herself into thinking Gerry made a

difference. Perhaps Randy would feel the same way even without Gerry's interference.

She would have to make herself eat again. And make herself go out, wearing a bright, false smile, and a brittle, false gayety. But she would do it tomorrow—or maybe the day after. Not today.

WHEN they drove to the arms plant at midnight, the weather was changing, and Jean had a heavy sense of foreboding. It couldn't be Skip, for Izzy had finally heard. It must be the wind and the lack of any breakfast. Izzy had been furious, but Jean simply couldn't eat. The black sky and the mourning wind were almost more than Jean could bear.

This time she did see Randy. He was talking to the fireman on their shift when they went into the building, and he called to Jean. "Long time no see. What do you hear from Gerry?"

"I haven't heard yet."

"He's probably busy," Randy consoled her. "Keep your chin up."

Jean stared at him numbly and then went on.

Her sense of foreboding grew, as the wind raked and tore angrily at the buildings. Now and then there was a muffled crash in the distance. Suddenly everything went deeply, quietly black. Jean drew back out of her workroom. She could hear a frightened murmur running about, and then the foreman's voice.

"When your eyes get used to the dark, go to the door. We are clearing the building because there is some danger that the sifting dust may combust with our powders."

But why the dark? The noise of the wind was swelling, until it seemed to Jean that it was about to suck the very breath from her. With the din her tension grew. Something was going to happen. Something was going to happen!

The girl next to her whimpered, "We've been bombed. Bombed! I just know it."

Jean shook her by the shoulder lightly. "Don't be silly." And don't be silly, yourself, Jean Bryan, she added silently. She felt very faint. She should have eaten. Where was Izzy? She could see now the faint silver-blue of the night through the mammoth windows, and the solid square from the open door. She groped toward it and the dark figure that stood there.

"Go directly to the inspection building," a voice said levelly. "Better crawl on your hands and knees. That wind's pretty high."

Jean could see the girls staggering ahead of her toward the building. Her dizziness was so bad that she was afraid to bend over, so she tried to make it standing up, feeling her away along the wall. Her legs seemed stiff and strange.

At the corner the wind leaped out with a whooping snarl, tearing at her clothes, blasting her with stinging sand until she was off balance. As she tried to bend against it, a sudden gust caught her and flung her back against the high braided wire fence. Jean flung her hands before her face to ward off the sand and weeds the wind was flinging at her. As she opened her eyes to see which way she should try to go, she saw it coming toward her, black and bumbling in the dark, and as it struck, she fainted.

When she came to, her sense of peril hadn't left her. There were little blue lights burning all around and above her, and there were dark shapes, all feet and legs, towering about her.

Then a dear, familiar voice. "She'll be around in a minute. She fainted when the piece of roofing blew against her."

"Randy," Jean whispered.

"It's all right, Jeanie. When they saw the wind coming up, they had me stay on, and I saw you fall."

Jean was still bewildered. All those blue flames. The looming shapes. There must have been an accident, but Randy was just

trying to spare her. She must find out.

Suddenly only one thing mattered. All the rest, the false pride, the misunderstandings, fell away. Jean slipped her arms about Randy's neck as he knelt there beside her. "Randy, I love you."

Randy gathered her up and kissed her, gently, then fiercely as if this one kiss must hold all he had ever felt. "Oh, Jeanie, Jeanie. When I saw you fall. . . ." Jean felt him shudder. Then abruptly he let her back down onto the floor. "I may be 4-F, but I'm not a heel!" he muttered.

Jean grabbed his arm to hold him there. "You're thinking of Gerry," she accused.

"Why not?" Randy's eyes were stern in the flickering half-light.

"Because he wanted to get away from everything in his old life—even me."

Randy gently disengaged her fingers. "He may have felt that way when he left, but when he's on duty somewhere, he'll long for someone to come home to. I won't trade on being a 4F so I can make love to a girl whose man is in the service!"

Jean was suddenly furious. He wasn't even considering how she might feel, trundling her about as a prize to the brave. She jumped to her feet so suddenly the blood sagged in her veins, dizzying her, but she shrugged off Randy's steadying hand.

"Randy, you fool! You insufferable idiot!"

SHE turned and fled blindly, banging against tables and stools in her haste. She saw now that she was in the cartridge inspection room, and she shrank back against the far wall, breathing heavily, her eyes closed, hating Randy. How long she stood so, she couldn't even guess, before she heard Izzy call her.

"Here I am," Jean answered.

Izzy made her way over. "I've been worried sick. Randy just told me you fainted. Are you all right?"

"Sure!" Jean tucked an arm through Izzy's. "I can't imagine what got into me. I've never fainted before this."

"Oh, you can't!" Izzy said. "Miss Cup of Tea. Miss Bird Appetite. Miss Bird Brain, I'd say. You're going to eat if I have to ram the food down your throat—coupons and all!"

Jean smiled wanly. "What's been happening?"

"The wind blew down the transformer and put the lights out, and broke out a lot of windows and doors. Goodness knows what else. The wind-meter out on the range registered eighty-five miles an hour."

Jean shivered. "It's still pretty bad."

About four in the morning, the lights went back on, and the wind died down sufficiently so that they could go back to work. Jean didn't see Randy again, which was probably just as well, for she had thought of a lot more she should have told him while she was about it.

She didn't see him again that week, but it didn't make her love him any less. At night she ached for him with the old longing. But with the morning, she remembered again the humiliation of slipping her arms about his neck only to be reminded sharply that she was being untrue—untrue to someone who didn't love her and didn't want her!

The first morning of the day shift, she had just started work when the foreman came in.

"You're wanted on the telephone in the office. Better hurry! It's important."

Jean's fears that perhaps her mother or father were ill faded abruptly when she heard Randy's voice.

"Jean? Randy. It's all arranged. You have the day off, and you're marrying your ensign in half an hour in Major Shurtliffe's office. I tried all night to get you."

"We spent the week-end with Izzy's folks." Then what Randy had said really sifted through to her consciousness. "Randy Nicholls! If you think you're going to get away with this!"

"Put on your best bib and tucker, young lady. I'll meet you there." And he hung up.

Jean was still looking at the telephone in angry disbelief when the foreman stepped in. "They sent word that you were to have the day off to get married. Congratulations!"

Jean slammed the telephone on the cradle. "There isn't going to be any wedding!" she snapped as she went through the door. "No one is going to marry me off to a man who doesn't want me."

"Hey! You can't wear your uniform out of the building," the foreman called after her.

"I'll be in Major Shurtliffe's office if you want me," Jean flung the words back without slackening her pace. "You can take it up with him."

THE Major's secretary looked up uneasily as Jean stalked in.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

"No," Jean said, with grim politeness.

The secretary moved a few things on her desk and then tried again. "There's to be a wedding here this morning. The Major has gone to the gate with passes for the wedding party. If you'd care to come back this afternoon when we're not quite so busy. . . ."

Jean was firm. "There isn't going to be any wedding."

The secretary gasped, and stared at her as if she were mad.

Jean's mother and father arrived just then and she faced them accusingly. "So you're in on this, too."

"Naturally, Randy phoned us," her mother said stiffly. "Must you be difficult, Jean? And couldn't you wear something more suitable?"

"There's more apt to be a funeral than a wedding when I find Randy." Jean sat down again and faced the door.

Mr. and Mrs. Bryan exchanged bewildered glances and then sat down uneasily.

The minister came in next. "Is this the right place?" He addressed her mother, but Jean answered. "It may be the right place, but there isn't going to be any wedding. You can just run along."

The minister's mystified glance plainly asked what business it was of hers. He just ignored Jean and sat gingerly on the edge of a chair. "I had better remain until Mr. Nicholls comes," he said haughtily.

Mr. Nicholls! Jean thought. When Mr. Nicholls came he would be sorry he had brought together such a big audience for what he was going to get! Gerard was probably home on furlough and Randy planned the whole thing in an orgy of noble gestures!

But when Randy opened the door, Jean was so stupefied that the first words were his.

"The bride," he whispered softly, "wore asbestos."

Jean glanced down at her wristlets and then up at Randy. "But where's Gerry? You—you're in uniform, Randy!"

"Gerry has competition from another ensign," Randy grinned. "From now on he'll have to look out for himself, where you're concerned. Sit down and I'll explain everything."

Jean followed him docilely to the davenport and let him hold both her hands in his. "First and most important," Randy said gravely, "the Navy changed its mind about me. They telegraphed the academy, and they mailed the telegram on to me! I just got it yesterday afternoon, and I'm supposed to be on the train tonight heading for Tucson! I kept every tailor I knew working all night. The one who made this suit told me to come back after the wedding to have the bastings taken out. And all night I kept the telephones hot trying to find you. This was an awful way to do it, Jeanie, but I had no time. Look, sweet, I love you. I always have. Will you marry me?"

(Please turn to page 112)

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A-222 FROM KENTUCKY

I am a colored girl from Kentucky. I am sixteen years old and I have many hobbies, including photography, and letter writing. I like sports and would like to correspond with Pen Pals between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three. Please write to me and I promise to answer all your letters.

May of Kentucky.

A-223 BLUE EYED SIXTEEN

I am a lonesome girl of sixteen. I have blond hair and blue eyes, I am five feet and two inches tall, and I would like to correspond with Pen Pals my own age or older. I like sports and dancing and have collected the signatures of some football and baseball players. I would like to correspond with some one interested in these sports. I do photography work in my spare time.

Blondie.

A-224 BROWN EYES
Will you let a brown-eyed girl in to your circle, who is five feet and six inches tall? I am a brunette with brown eyes and I like nearly all sports, but my favorite is horseback riding. I want to write to Pen Pals all over the country and will exchange snapshots with them. I sing in the Glee Club during the school year. I will answer all your letters.
Jo.

A-225 BLUE EYES
My dearest friend was killed at Pearl Harbor and I am lonely and hope some one will write to me. I have blue eyes and brown hair, am five feet and four inches tall. I like reading, dancing and shows, am fond of pets, and I enjoy cooking. Please write to me and I will be a faithful correspondent.
Just Lonesome.

A-226 PATRIOTIC LASS
I am a girl sixteen years old, have dark hair and eyes, am five feet and four inches tall. I am helping in the war effort by buying war bonds and stamps, as I am too young to help otherwise. I like sports and have numerous hobbies. Would some of you write to a lonely girl?
Cuddles.

A-227 SMILING BRUNETTE
I am sixteen years old, five feet tall, and have brown eyes. My weight is medium and my hobby is collecting stamps, snapshots, and match book covers. I like to dance and go to shows and I would like to write to Pen Pals between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two. Come and get acquainted and I will promise to answer each letter promptly
Smily.

A-228 QUEBEC NURSE
I am a graduate registered nurse at St. Michel Archange, of Quebec, but I am taking private cases in Montreal. I have brown hair and gray eyes and am five feet and seven inches tall. I like soft music and dancing, good movies Please let me hear from you and I promise to answer promptly.
Nichole.

A-229 COLLEGE GRADUATE
Please let me into your friendly circle. I am a girl twenty years old, am five feet and one inch tall, and I weigh one hundred and sixteen pounds. I have dark reddish brown hair and Irish blue eyes. I like roller skating, hiking and dancing. I am a college graduate, and my profession is beauty culture. I like to write letters, as well as to receive them.
Gerry.

A-230 LONELY SIXTEEN
I would like to correspond with everybody from seven to seventeen. I am a sixteen-year-old high school girl, and am lonely since most of my friends are in the Army, or in defense plants. I have dark brown hair and eyes, and a wonderful personality. Please write to me, and I will answer promptly.
Phil.

A-231 BLUE EYED SIXTEEN
Boys and girls, between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, won't you please write to me? I am a high school girl, with golden brown hair and blue eyes, and about five feet and five and one-half inches tall. I like dancing and swimming and I am popular with all the girls and boys. I am also interested in medicine. Please do write to me. I will be waiting.
Sally.

A-232 BROWN HAIRED BEAUTY
My favorite hobby is collecting snapshots and post cards, but I like dancing and skating too, very much. Please, boys and girls, around the ages of sixteen and twenty-three, won't you write to me? I am a girl seventeen and have brown hair and hazel eyes. I am five feet and three inches tall.
Doll.

A-233 SINGING CANADA GIRL
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ALL-STORY LOVE

"Oh, Randy!" Jean's smoky black eyes held no trace of misery or anger. They were so alight they gave him her answer even before she whispered, "Of course, Randy, darling."

Jean's mother found her voice then. "I do think, Jean, that I'd better drive back and get you a dress."

"Would you like that?" Jean turned to Randy.

"I couldn't bear to waste a minute," Randy said solemnly.

"Me either," Jean whispered, slipping a hand into his.

And that was the way the ceremony was performed. Afterward Randy almost crushed her when he kissed her—and she loved it.

"Where would you like to go for your honeymoon, Mrs. Nicholls?" he asked before he released her.

Jean laughed up at him. "There's always Niagara Falls and Mexico, or the Canadian Northwest."

"We'll do them all," Randy promised, kissing her again.

"If I may intrude," Jean's father said dryly, "I have a car almost full of A gas outside, and here," he fished in his pocket, "are the keys to it and to the cabin at the lake."

"What do you say, Mrs. Nicholls?" Randy asked gravely.

"I think," Jean said, her voice deep with emotion, "that it's Niagara Falls, Mexico and the Canadian Northwest rolled into one. And tomorrow," she added, "I begin practicing on a sprint that will beat Izzy to the mailbox!"

And for that, she was kissed again.

was not why he stopped. It was because he had, for the moment, forgotten about last night. She was not a girl he was, or ever could be, in love with. Not for this moment, anyway. She was somebody familiar, a friend in that mob of howling wolves. He checked his stride without thinking and flipped his hand in greeting.

She looked straight through him as if he weren't there at all. He thought there was someone else in the box—maybe a man—who spoke to him. But he could not be sure about that. It was only a second, but a second without end, before he moved on. He was still seeing the unbelievable coldness of her blue eyes.

A spatter of hand-clapping ran across the stands, and grew into a great crackling wave of applause as he took the mound. Burdick, the catcher, came out to talk to him.

Righty thought: The hell with her!

And that went for the lot of them. Yesterday the applause would have warmed and put heart into him. Yesterday he would have thought it was because of those three scoreless innings last week in Boston. Or because they loved Lefty and wanted to welcome his brother.

Now he knew better. Now he knew it didn't mean a thing except a lot of noise. They all saw the papers this morning and knew his name. Today they would tear his buttons off for souvenirs, and maybe tomorrow they would tear his gizzard out.

Righty looked around checking the base-runners. He had thrown in the last of his warm-up pitches and dried his hands on the rosin bag. He glanced down to Burdick to get the sign.

(Continued Next Month)

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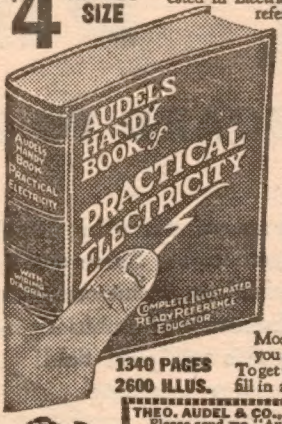

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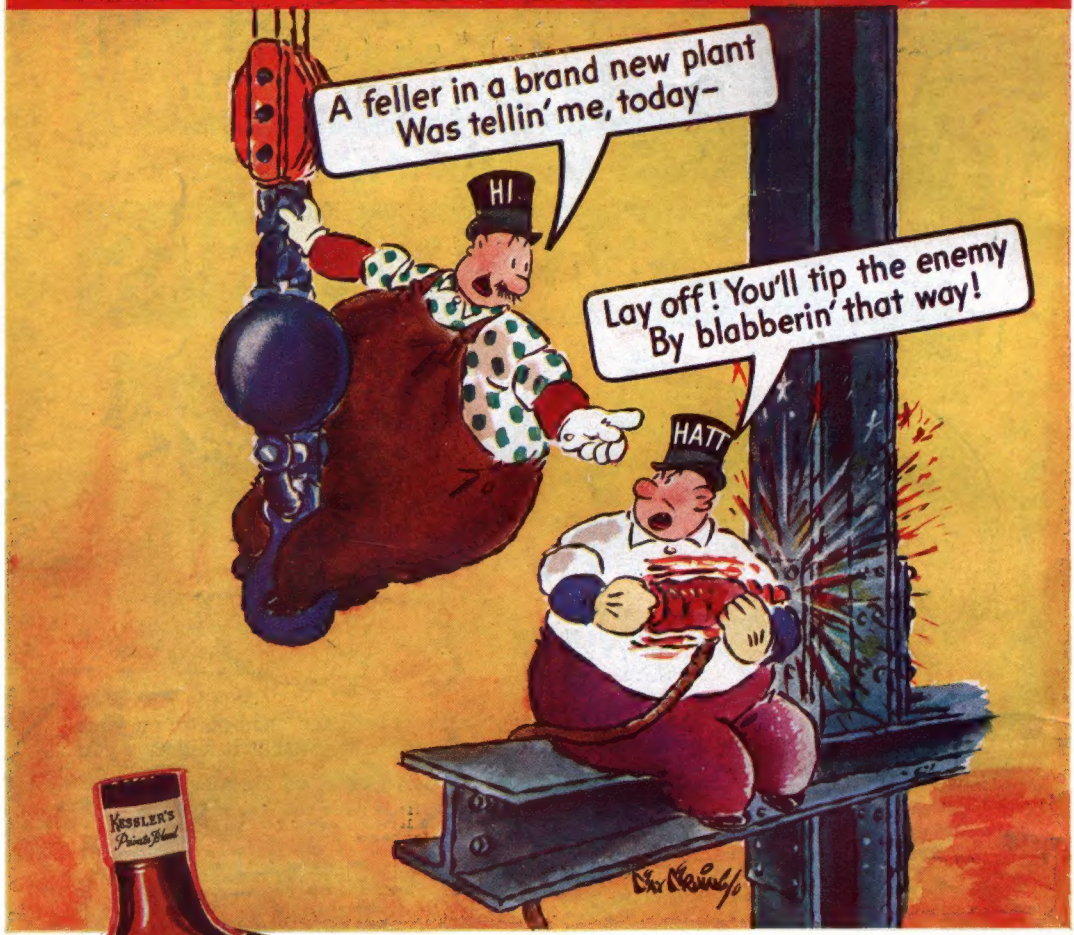

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